

Zechariah 9:9-10 “Righteous and Humble”

I have to confess that we preachers make assumptions about people's knowledge of “church things,” especially as they relate to the “church year.” And I say “the church year” because it's different than the calendar year. It starts usually in November on the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is when we prepare for Christmas. And Christmas goes on for 12 days past Christmas until you get to Epiphany. Then you've got Lent, Easter, Pentecost, “common time” and then you start all over again. We are now in the “Lent” part of the church calendar year. In the same way that Advent prepares us for Christmas, Lent prepares us for Easter. And every year we study different things during Lent. This year we focused on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. A couple of years ago we talked about spiritual disciplines. So even though most of Lent looks different every year, the one thing that never changes is how the season ends in Holy Week. Holy Week starts today ... Palm Sunday ... with Jesus entering Jerusalem for the last time, and it ends with his crucifixion and death, and then we've got Resurrection Day on Easter!

So you might ask, “Wait a minute ... the scripture Glen just read is in the Old Testament. There's nothing here that says anything about Jesus.” True. But this is the scripture that lays the foundation for what Jesus did on what we call Palm Sunday. This text comes from the Prophet Zechariah. Zechariah is one of those prophets who made a lot of references to the Jewish Messiah ... the one who would come in and re-establish Israel as a great nation. He writes, “Lo your king comes to you triumphant and victorious!” He goes on to explain how this victorious king wouldn't arrive like the traditional kings and conquerors who came with their war horses and chariots. God's king will come on a donkey. God's king isn't going to be a conquering king in the traditional sense. God's king will be a peace-bringing king. Triumphant and victorious nonetheless, but still ... much different than a typical king of that day. God's king will overthrow the oppressive nations and establish a reign of peace.

So how does this relate to Palm Sunday? Okay, fine. You didn't really think I'd skip the Palm Sunday story did you? So since we've been in Matthew's gospel, let's read his account. This is chapter 21:1-11 when Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last time.

When they (Jesus and his disciples) had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.' This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

'Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!' When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

First off, I really need to get this out of the way because it's ... I wouldn't say "sacrilegious" ... more "irreverent" I guess if that makes it any better. But I've got to share something from Robb McCoy, a commentator I listened to this past week. He was pointing out that Luke and Mark's gospels have Jesus riding in on a colt. Matthew's gospel seems to want to take Zechariah's text more literally and he wrote, "They brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and (Jesus) sat on them." And even though "them" probably refers to the cloaks, this is the image that came to Robb's mind when he read

Matthew's version: (Aquaman riding dolphins.) I did this for you Glen. Okay, let's get that image off the screen ... please.

When we read this, we think "Oh, interesting story. Odd, but interesting nonetheless." We understand the words enough to where we can come up with an image of what this makeshift parade may have looked like, but we really don't get it. People in Matthew's time? They got this. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on the back of a colt was a bold move on his part. What he did was subversive. Seditious even. See, Jesus did this during Passover. Passover is an important Jewish holy day because it marks the beginning of the Exodus. And what was the Exodus? It's when God's people said, "Enough is enough" to being slaves in Egypt and they fled Pharaoh's oppressive rule to start over in a new promised land. And this happened because God delivered them. God delivered God's people from the hands of an oppressive ruler.

Now put yourself into Rome's position. You're trying your best to keep peace in the empire. You're trying to find a balance between keeping law and order through force and intimidation and letting the folks in the provinces hold onto their cultural and religious identity. One hand, you've got to have a zero tolerance policy for dissent, but you've also got to let folks practice their religion and religious rituals. Otherwise they'd spend all their time and resources dealing with uprisings, and they had already experienced their fair share of this in Judea. But one of the highest holy days in Judea commemorates the Jewish people being delivered from a "super-power" by their God. That tends to get people riled up. So it's likely this is why Pontius Pilate was present in Jerusalem.

See, we get the idea that Pontius Pilate sort of "lived" in Jerusalem, but he was the governing ruler over a huge geographical area that included Sumeria and Idumia as well as Judea. So he's not always in the neighborhood. But we know he is during this time because he's present to oversee Jesus' trial and crucifixion. So it's possible that Pilate came to Jerusalem as a deterrent for any potential uprising during Passover.

Now ... any time a governing ruler from Rome came to town, there was big fanfare. So it's likely that when Pilate came to town, he entered the main gate to the city as a show of force ... with war horses, chariots, and "battle bows" (sort of like how Zechariah describes in our main text!) The message to the people would have been crystal clear: Do not mess with Rome. Don't even think about opposing us. We are here. We are watching. And we will win ... we will beat you if you try anything. That's what goes on over at the Northern gate to the city whenever Pilate comes to town. Meanwhile, at the much smaller Eastern gate, we have Jesus entering the city in a totally different way. He's riding in on a little colt or maybe a donkey. Just like this passage from Zechariah. Can you understand now why there were people there shouting and waving palms? This was Jesus' way of laying down the gauntlet as far as the Romans were concerned. He knew what that text from Zechariah meant. And so did the people! The one who came into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey was the one who was going to establish this new kingdom where peace is achieved through non-violence. Rome's idea of "peace" was to keep people in their place so they wouldn't rise up. So this whole scene at the East gate of Jerusalem was a show of opposition ... of defiance to Rome. Mind you, it was sort of a weird way of showing defiance. No one was waving swords or knives or bows or singing battle songs. They were waving palms and greeting Jesus.

Here's something that I've been guilty of. I've preached that typical old sermon about how "the same people that cheered Jesus on as he entered into the city were the same ones who cheered for his crucifixion a week later." But I've backed off of that idea in recent years, because I believe the people who greeted Jesus at the East gate were different from the ones who greeted Pilate at the North gate. The ones who greeted Pilate more or less supported Rome's occupation of Judea. They appreciated the relative peace and security that Rome brought to the region. They enjoyed the creature comforts that came along with being under Roman rule and didn't mind the compromises they had to make to keep them. They were willing to give up most of their freedom in exchange for security. So yes ... when Pilate came to town, they'd be there cheering

for him. And yes ... those are the type of folks who would be present at Jesus' "trial" calling for his crucifixion.

On the Eastern gate, however, the crowd that greeted Jesus were the ones who "got it." They're the ones who recognized Rome for what it was: Just another empire that kept people in their place by the threat of violence and by overburdening them with taxes and by preventing them from practicing their religion in a way that was faithful to their God. These are the ones who had high hopes for Jesus being the one who would establish a new reign. One that would free them and allow them to be all God called them to be.

Now I suppose if you wanted to put this whole scene at the East Gate in a context that we might understand better, we could compare this to a peace march. Tuesday was the 49th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. King, as you know, was known for his peace marches. He was an advocate for justice through non-violent protest. He learned this from Jesus. He was an ordained minister. He took the East Gate approach when it came to standing up to the powers that be who would treat people of color as non-equals. And like Jesus, he died for his efforts. And like Jesus, he knew that his death would be inevitable. In his final speech the day before his assassination, he said, "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

As we enter into Holy Week, may we fix our eyes on Jesus, the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna. Hosanna in the highest.