

Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020
Matthew 21:1-11
Pastor Lauren Eanes

I have to admit I'm feeling super jealous of the people who went out to greet Jesus as he entered Jerusalem. I'm jealous obviously because they got to see Jesus, in the flesh, but to be honest, I have to admit in this moment, I'm perhaps even more jealous that they got to be together in a crowd.

They didn't live in a time of physical distancing. Their parade wasn't cancelled. They were able to be a crowd, much as we wanted to be a crowd in worship today.

But because we can't be together as a crowd today, let's see if we can live vicariously through them for a few minutes here.

It seems like there was a pretty large group of people who were following Jesus at this point, folks who had heard him teach and had seen him do miraculous things.

Who knows what they were thinking was going to happen once they arrived in Jerusalem? We know Jesus tried to tell them: three times he foretold his death and resurrection. But we also know the disciples were having trouble really hearing that message.

So by the time they all arrived at Jerusalem, my guess is that most of the people gathered were still expecting Jesus to enter the city as a more traditional triumphant, conquering king. That's what they were used to.

In fact, it's likely that at the exact same time that Jesus and his followers were entering the city from the east, a Roman imperial procession of troops and calvary were entering the city from the west, headed by Pilate. They were coming into town to reinforce Roman rule during the time of Passover, when tens of thousands of Jewish pilgrims filled the city.

So we see this setup of the clash of these two kingdoms. I'm sure a lot of the people who were cheering on Jesus were looking for a political savior, a conquering king who would come and defeat the Roman oppressors.

Which is probably why Matthew spends so much time setting the stage here for what Jesus was riding that day. You'd expect a king to be riding something strong, like a war horse or a chariot, but we're told Jesus was riding...well, two animals: a donkey and a colt. I'm having trouble picturing this scene. I'm not sure how you ride a donkey and a colt at the same time. I get this image of Aquaman standing with a foot on each dolphin. Is that what Jesus was doing, sort of riding the waves with these two animals?

Likely, no. Matthew is the only one of the gospel writers who include this detail about two animals, and it's because Matthew is really focused on showing how Jesus' life and death is connected to the prophets. He draws from Zechariah here, when he quotes: "Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

But it's probably also more than just wanting to be literally lined up with Zechariah. One New Testament scholar writes that "Matthew wants two animals, a donkey with her little colt beside her, and that Jesus rides 'them' in the sense of having them both as part of his demonstration's highly visible

symbolism. In other words, Jesus does not ride a stallion or a mare, a mule or a male donkey, and not even a female donkey. He rides the most unmilitary mount imaginable: a female nursing donkey with her little colt trotting along beside her.”¹

Jesus wanted to be very clear about the kind of kingdom he was ushering in. It was not a forceful, military overthrow. He is not a typical triumphant, conquering king. His kingdom has come to overthrow a system of violence, but not by force, but by humility. His kingdom has come to bring peace.

And the crowds who have gathered are hungry for that kingdom. They wanted Jesus to save them from oppression, from a system of domination that took advantage of the poor, and had allowed their temple to be used to perpetuate injustice. They cried out Hosanna, save us! They’re pleading with him: Free us. Liberate us.

As a sign of their willingness to submit to Jesus as their ruler, they threw their cloaks on the road, which was a sign of paying homage to a ruler. And they waved their palm branches to honor their king.

We typically focus on the palm branches on this day, and to be honest I’d never really thought much about the cloaks, or how they might be a sign of what Jesus is doing in the world. I guess I just thought of them as: well, we do a ticker tape parade for someone we want to honor, and back then, they laid coats down to honor him. And that’s all that was.

But then this past week, I was listening to the Public Radio show This American Life and they were doing stories on how people are dealing with coronavirus in their lives. One of the stories was an interview with an American who lives in Shanghai, China, where quarantining restrictions have been lifted, and folks have started to go back to their ordinary lives. The interviewer asked her, “What does it feel like to be on the other side of this?”

The woman replied, “It feels like taking off a really hot jacket. You know when you’re wearing a winter jacket and all of a sudden the weather gets warmer, and you’re like, Ah, I don’t need to be wearing this anymore. And you take it off and you’ve got a short sleeves on and you just feel relaxed.”²

I’ve always thought of a coat as being something that protects us from the weather. I’d never thought about it being something that could bind us or oppress us or keep us from living our lives fully. But that’s what this stay-at-home order feels like in many ways. It’s something that is there to protect us, but it feels so restrictive and I just want to take it off right now and I can’t. And obviously right now it’s important that we don’t.

But that got me thinking about other metaphorical “coats” in my life, things that I’ve put on myself that I thought would protect me but has ended up binding or restricting me.

I think one of those coats has been control. I like to feel like I have a general sense of control over my life, and obviously this past month has shattered a lot of those illusions, but I keep pulling that coat tighter, and instead of protecting me, it’s started to immobilize me.

¹ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2012/03/jesus-subversive-donkey-ride-a-progressive-christian-lectionary-commentary-for-palm-sunday/>

² <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/698/the-test>

What might it look like to take that coat off, and lay it down in front of Jesus, and allow him to literally walk over it, to trample it down, and just ride on into town with this reign of peace. Would that feel like freedom and liberation? Would that feel like a short sleeved t-shirt after months of a heavy jacket?

What about the other things I wrap myself in, like anxiety and fear and clinging to my stuff, my financial resources, my busyness and desire to be productive? What about my straight out sin, this coat that I choose to wear in which I turn inward and participate in systems of injustice and put my trust in things that aren't God?

Could all of my sin and shame and all those things that cover me and bind me be taken off, and laid down in front of Jesus, for him to just trample over?

And really, isn't that what this week is all about? Isn't that why we sing Hosanna? Because we want to be saved by the only one who can truly do take these coats off and trample them to the ground? The one who enters into human life and brings good news to the poor, healing to the brokenhearted, sight to the blind, release to the captive. The one who sets a place at the table for the outcast, forgives sinners, loves enemies, and gives life to the dead. The one who, everywhere he goes, tramples the coats that hide the fullness of life.

In spite of this, or maybe because of this, over the next few days the crowd's hosannas become shouts of "Crucify him!" We know the earth shattering conflict and redemption that is about to unfold. For now, let's pause here, with this crowd, and lay down our coats, and witness the Son of God riding into town to save us. Amen.