

## THE DECISION TO RIDE

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

March 16, 2008

Scripture: Matthew 21:1-11; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

The songwriter of Psalm 118 scripted the whole thing, the procession and triumphal entry that we remember today. It's lifted from the pages of the psalmist's hymnal word for word; that, and references to Zechariah and Isaiah. Matthew, the gospel writer, who paints everything in terms of the Old Testament connects the dots for us.

At the outset he tells us that Jesus is fulfilling scripture. "Go into the next town and you'll find a donkey and a colt tied up just like Zechariah said. Get them and bring them to me. And if anybody stops you, give them the secret password, the purposeful look, and say that the master has need of them." And sure enough they went into town and found the colt and the donkey, just as he said, and somebody questioned the disciples and they said their words on cue and everything happened just the way it was supposed to. The whole thing is on auto-pilot.

In fact, Matthew is so reluctant to tamper with the Old Testament rooting of the story that he leaves both the colt and the donkey referred to by the prophet Zechariah in the story. And while almost everybody agrees that the colt and the donkey are one in the same in Zechariah's reference, Matthew is taking no chances, and has Jesus straddle both animals at once as he rides into the city of Jerusalem, difficult as that balancing act may have been.

The crowds throw down their garments and cut branches to welcome the triumphal king as he enters the city's gate to the accolades and praises of the now familiar psalm, "Hosanna," "Save us from on high," "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." It's the chorus of the 118<sup>th</sup> psalm that begins,

*Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
That I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.  
The stone that the builders have rejected  
Has become the chief cornerstone.  
This is the Lord's doing;  
It is marvelous in our eyes.  
This is the day that the Lord has made;  
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.  
Hosanna, (save us) ...*

We have to pinch ourselves to remember that there were no reporters there that day. There was no *Jerusalem Times*, no *Ha'aretz*, no reporters there with notebooks in hand to make an accurate record of everything that was said and done. It is, rather, the reconstruction of memory that has shaped and molded this story.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus occurred, the apostles started preaching and telling the story of his last days. The fragments and pieces of what they said became familiar. They repeated it again and again, until finally the story was honed and perfected like wheels wearing down a path in the road with the phrasing and commentary that betrayed the theological perspectives of each of the gospel writers.

Somewhere along the way people said, “And what were the last days like? The days before his crucifixion?” And Peter and Andrew and James and John and Phillip and Bartholomew and the others said, it was like... it was like... Psalm 118. He rode into the city like a king that day, and they cut branches and strewed their coats on the road to welcome him, and shouted, “Save us, from on high. Blessed are you, coming as you do, in the name of the Lord.”

They are the last stories we remember about him and so they are the most cherished, the most rehearsed, like beads worn down by our fingering them a thousand times to focus our meditation and our prayers.

It’s always that way when we remember the stories that define us, that shape our lives and those we love. “Tell us about mother’s last day,” we ask. “What happened when you got to the hospital? How did she look? Was there any sign that she wasn’t going to make it? Had she had any pain in her chest, any indigestion, any nausea to give you a clue as to what was happening?”

“No, she just complained of being short of breath, and we got her to the hospital, and they worked on her and they thought they had her stabilized, and then just when we were sure it was going to be all right, she arrested. She was so brave. She was so confident. We all took courage from her.”

It was like... it was like Psalm 118, they said about Jesus’ last arrival in the city, “He rode through the gates like a king and they cut branches and strew the coats on the road to welcome him, and shouted, ‘Hosanna, save us, from on high. Blessed are you, coming as you do, in the name of the Lord.’” That’s what it was like.

When I was a kid, we always loved Palm Sunday. It was like a dress rehearsal for the following week, for Easter. There was a festive mood. The kids would all come into the church like they did this morning, waving palms, happy, as we sang, “All glory, laud and honor.” It was a kind of spring ritual. A joyful mood was in the air.

And then the following Sunday there would be Easter, and everybody in the family would have some new clothes, and there’d be chocolate Easter eggs and all my aunts and uncles and cousins would come for dinner. It was a little bit like Christmas except without the presents or the tree.

Two Sundays in a row of festivity. Palm Sunday, the warm-up. And never a whisper, really, of what would happen in between. We were none of us, in our family, very good with the dying part, the cross, the suffering and death. We’d seen that already in the death of my father who died of cancer while all four of us children were quite young.

So we sort of skipped over the dying part, because that was not what Easter was about for our family. For my mother, and so for us, it was about the resurrection part. The hope, the rite of spring when all things come alive again, even our hope of seeing our dad once again. If Jesus could rise from the dead, our faith told us we could to. And so is our Christian hope, that we shall see one another face to face once again.

But, Palm Sunday is also Passion Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week, with all its somber events, and the truth is that it is not just a warm up for Easter, but also a warm up for Good Friday. It is about the beginning of the ending.

It's about the cross on the horizon, at the edge of the city's wall. It's about the lump that must have been in Jesus' throat as he rode into the city that day conscious of what Jerusalem would mean to him, which was confrontation, betrayal, arrest, scattering, and death. There was a certain hollowness to the praises of the crowd shouting his name and throwing out their coats before him. He already understood what the true meaning of their call to save them would require. It would require his death.

In the short matter of a few days, one unholy holy week, the cries to save would become the cries to crucify. And the very voices raised today to praise him, will be the voices raised to kill him.

There is, I suppose one particular question worth pondering in all of this, and that is *why*. Why if he knew, or at least suspected, that they would kill him, did he climb up on that donkey, on that colt, and ride the way he did, into the city?

I would have run in the opposite direction for all I was worth. Turned tail and gotten out of there, worked with my strategic team of Twelve on another scenario, some subversive approach that could have accomplished my goal, but not cost me my life. Remember George C. Scott's words in the guise of General George Patton speaking to the troops at beginning of the movie the old general, when he said "Now I want you to remember that no [soldier] ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making the other poor dumb [so and so] die for his country," or words to that effect.

But not Jesus. He rides today into the jaws of the lion knowing full well what the cost will be, and no one's life laid down will count as much as his.

There was a moment, let there be no doubt, before the first blanket was laid on the donkey's back, before the jump onto the animals' shoulders when his life must have passed before him. When he might have considered another way, some less costly approach. A flickering pause on which the whole enterprise of human salvation hung in the balance for a moment, dangling... and then, he mounted the beast, and the inexorable movement toward Golgotha began.

I am grateful to my friend John Buchanan for reminding me of my Macalester College classmate, Tim O'Brien's, wonderful book, *The Things They Carried*.<sup>1</sup> Tim graduated from Macalester Phi Beta Kappa in 1968, and that summer his draft board notified him that he was being drafted into the Army. Tim was not a thoroughgoing pacifist. He felt that we were right to go to war to fight Nazism in World War II, but he also believed that Viet Nam was an ideologically driven war that was taking a terrible toll on Cambodians, Thais, Vietnamese, and Laotians. He wrestled mightily with his misgivings, uncertain whether it was just that he was afraid of dying, or that he was simply afraid. Or was he truly principled? One thing he knew, he was torn with anguish.

In his book O'Brien describes heading north in Minnesota for the Canadian border, until he stopped at a tourist fishing camp. The fishing season was over. But he was taken in by the proprietor, Elroy, who asked no questions but understood exactly what it was that O'Brien was doing and struggling with. They ate their suppers together, talked some, and fished.

After almost two weeks, Elroy and O'Brien went out by night to do some fishing. Elroy steered the boat way over to the Canadian side of the river, just twenty feet away,

cut the motor and put out a line. All O'Brien had to do was step out of the boat and wade to Canada. But he couldn't do it. Elroy had brought him to the moment of decision. But O'Brien writes,

Right then, with the shore so close, I understood that I would do what I should do, I would not swim away from my country and my life... I would not be brave... I would go to the war. I would kill and maybe die – because I was embarrassed not to... I sat in the bow of the boat and cried.

The next day, O'Brien headed home. "I survived," he says. "I was a coward... I went to war." His book tells the stories of those who fought and died and were brave, and it is written by a man who has never accepted the fact that even he was brave, much as he interprets his decision to be drafted as cowardice.

O'Brien's choice reminds me that Jesus had a choice as well. It was not all written in the stars, not if he was *fully human* as traditional Christian theology teaches us. While much occurred to fulfill prophetic expectation, and the gospel writers are able to draw the clear lines for us, there was still that moment that he might not have done it.

After all, Jesus' determination as described in the hindsight of the gospels is more unwavering than might well have been the reality when he was going into and living through it. Surely he was at least that human, human enough to doubt whether he should go through with it, like all of us doubt the turning points in our lives, not really knowing where life will take us.

We none of us have the benefit of knowing the outcome of our greatest risks in life or what the end of our greatest bravery will be, regardless of the form that bravery may take or in what way we may be called upon to express it. We only know what Jesus knew, which is that God was riding with him, as he rode into Jerusalem that day, sure that there were few outcomes save the one that was already being hewed for him, among the shavings dropping to the floor in some carpenter's shop in the praetorian guard where the crosses were cut and measured for executions.

It is not avoidance of the hard things in life to which we are born anew in this Christian life, but it is in facing them that our faith is forged and our commitment is proven.

Nobody wants him to enter the city with fear in his heart today, but fear there must have been, mixed with bravery. For what is it to be fully human if not to face what he did as we would, with knees trembling, and balance askew trying to stay upright on a donkey and a colt all at the same time.

By the grace of God, he comes, *by the grace of God*, as we and everyone around us cry out to him a phrase that will describe precisely what he will do, words that are more than we understand and all that will be accomplished.

"Hosanna, *save us*. Blessed are you, coming as you do, in the name of the Lord."

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<sup>1</sup> John Buchanan, sermon “Denied”, February 17, 2008. Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL. I have borrowed and paraphrased liberally from Rev. Buchanan’s text describing the O’Brien book.