

Sermon – April 5, 2020
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text – Matthew 21:1-11

Hear the words of the Lord from the Gospel of Matthew for us this morning. This morning's scripture reading is Matthew 21:1-11. Jesus and his disciples have been on the road to Jerusalem. This is the point in their journey when they will see and then enter Jerusalem. Listen to these words.

When they 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 fulfill 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."

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, Lord Christ.

Pray with me: *Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words, make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Amen*

Welcome to our live stream for The Northumberland Charge on Palm Sunday 2020. As I read material this past week, preparing for this morning's sermon, I discovered a story about a child's memory of a special Palm Sunday. I want to share that story this morning. As a boy, this writer remembers a Sunday morning when all of the children of the church were gathered, given palms, and lined the aisle of his church. The children were told to wave the palms they held, and

then the front doors to the church opened and in came a man riding a donkey, a real live donkey. The rider and donkey came down the aisle through the waving palms and stopped at the front of the church. This was a real live donkey in the church! This moment became a significant memory for the writer, a memory that impacted his life. The man on a donkey in the church became a moment in time that caused him to begin to ask the question, “Who is this?” with the result that he would spend a lifetime seeking the answer to that question. He did recognize the pastor as the rider that day, but this question became for him one of “Who did this rider on a donkey represent?” That question drew him into seeking an understanding of who Jesus is and what this rider and animal meant for him. His memory has given me a new idea. I am beginning to think that a donkey is something that every pastor should have. Think of the uses: Christmas parades, Christmas Eve services with kids, and Palm Sunday’s procession down the aisle of the church. I might even convince the Northumberland Charge trustees that a donkey could be used to mow the grass at the parsonage. So, my new goal is to work to become a pastor with a donkey. With that goal, I am here on this Palm Sunday morning, a morning that is not memorable for a live donkey coming down the aisle, but for a sermon preached to empty pews and a virtual congregation. The writer’s memory is also key for us in that it forms the question each of us must answer in our lives. As we hear the words read from Matthew’s Gospel, we also become a person standing on the side of the road seeing a man riding donkeys into Jerusalem. We also have to answer the question, “Who is this?” Who is this man who rides two donkeys through the east gate of Jerusalem? Let’s look at this morning’s scripture from Matthew to see what he tells us about answers to this question.

This morning marks the start of Holy Week on the church calendar. Traditionally, this journey began earlier, on this past Friday, most likely in the morning, as Jesus and those who follow him left Jericho for a walk of some 15 miles and a rise in elevation of over 2000 ft. to arrive at Bethany, a town just east of Jerusalem. They must complete this walk before sunset as that is the start of the Sabbath. As they leave Jericho, two blind men call out to Jesus, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on us.” The men cannot see Jesus, but they hear the crowd going by and cry out for help. Jesus stops and heals them, restoring their sight, the last of the miracles before he turns to Jerusalem. Jesus also does not correct their claim to his being a Son of David. He leaves open the Messianic overtones in their cry. In Bethany, Jesus celebrates the Sabbath, and it is on that Saturday evening that Mary, Lazarus’s sister, anoints Jesus’ feet with an expensive

perfume and prepares him for burial. That event marks the beginning of Holy Week for the church. It seems an odd beginning for what I hold is the most significant week in the shared history of humankind.

On Sunday, the first day of the week, Jesus and those who follow him leave Bethany and are headed up the road to Jerusalem. Just before they crest the hill, a point from where they will be able to look down on the city of Jerusalem, and just before they can see the magnificent Temple reflecting the morning sun, Jesus stops and sends two disciples to get a donkey and her foal tied up in the small village across the road. When Jesus sends these disciples, he gives them words to share with the owner of the animals if their actions are questioned. In doing so, Jesus has called himself Lord, the name he often uses for himself. It is a name that could be used to indicate a distinguished man or to indicate God. It is the first of many names that we will hear this day that might be the answer to our question, "Who is this?" Is this just another man among the multitude that comes to Jerusalem from all over Israel and the surrounding countries for the celebration of Passover? Could he be more than a distinguished man? Could he be Lord? Could he be God?

The disciples bring Jesus the donkeys. They place their cloaks on the animals for Jesus to sit on and Jesus then sits on the animals. They move forward going up the hill, the same hill where the Garden of Gethsemane is located, the garden where Jesus and his disciples will spend time this week. It is the garden where Jesus will pray on Thursday in great anguish for not his will but God's will to be done. It is the hill where on that same night Jesus will be betrayed by one of his disciples. It is the hill where King David, as he fled from the revolt against his kingship over Israel led by his son Absalom, was met by another man with two donkeys for him to ride as he left Jerusalem. Jesus is preparing to come back over this same hilltop riding on two donkeys and then ride into Jerusalem.

Once you top the hill of the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem is about a mile to the east. I am told from this vantage point you are looking down on the Temple. Spread out before you is the daughter of Zion, Jerusalem. The scripture does not describe this moment in detail. I think Jesus and the crowd might have paused or at least gotten quiet as their eyes scanned this magnificent scene. As they looked down on Jerusalem, expectations must have filled their minds. All of those expectations are answers to the question, "Who is this?" Who is this riding the two donkeys heading into Jerusalem? Perhaps Jesus' disciples and those in the crowd with them find

their minds filling with memories of kings of the past who came humbly on donkeys. These are kings who came in peace. Perhaps they are reminded of the prophecy from Zachariah about a coming king, “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.” Perhaps they are reminded of how past kings were welcomed. Surely, they are also reminded that it is not a king of Israel who rules Jerusalem, but a ruler from Rome who currently occupies this city. The road around them and ahead of them are crowded with people who have journeyed from countries to the east to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. Those travelers ahead of Jesus no doubt look back and see a person mounted on a donkey, a lone person not walking as pilgrims were supposed to travel to Jerusalem for Passover, but mounted, riding on two donkeys. A question also must be forming in their minds, the same question, “Who is this?” It might be the two blind men Jesus healed at Jericho in the crowd following Jesus who, with their restored sight and upon seeing the daughter of Zion and Jesus on donkeys, begin to shout, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” We don’t know who started this shout but someone did and it caught and spread quickly throughout the crowd. Jesus and the disciples and the crowd following him move forward over the hill and down the road to Jerusalem.

Those in the crowd before Jesus see this progression and hear shouts of praise to a king, to a Son of David mounted on a donkey returning in peace to Jerusalem, and they respond as those of Israel have often responded to new kings in the past, by placing their cloaks on the ground for Jesus to ride over them. Those placing their cloaks on the road do so to recognize a king of Israel, a king of the Jews. Others run to trees in the fields along the sides of the road and cut branches of palms, the national symbol of Israel, and place them in the road. They are welcoming a new king of the Jews to replace those of Rome who now rule over Jerusalem. Those placing the branches are welcoming a new king over Israel who will restore a Jewish king as ruler over Israel. By the actions of the crowd, we have been given another answer for our question, “Who is this?” The crowds hail Jesus as a king, a ruler over the Jews. Jesus is silent. He does not quiet the crowds or deny the crowd’s Messianic answer to our question heard in their shouts. Could the answer to our question be that this is one who comes in the name of the Lord to free Israel?

It is just over a mile from the top of the Mount of Olives to the east gate of the city of Jerusalem. This scene of a king coming to the daughter of Zion continues as the growing crowd comes down the mount, crosses the valley, and enters the city. As they enter the city, the news of the coming of a peaceful king spreads throughout the city and with that news comes turmoil. Is this a king to challenge Rome? Is this a king to challenge the religious leaders of Jerusalem? The people in the crowds in the city begin to ask, "Who is this?" And in the crowds of Jerusalem, there are those who recognize Jesus and answer this question by saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." We have another possible answer to our question, "Who is this?" It is the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee. In the crowd's answer to our question, we should hear the tension that Jesus' arrival creates for those living in the southern part of Israel. They are asking, "What is this prophet from another place doing here in Jerusalem?" This is a place where he does not belong. He is from another tribe and not of the southern tribe of Israel. Why is Jesus here? Why does he come from the east riding on donkeys, to the shouts of those who welcome a new ruler from the line of David? The answer Matthew leaves us with this morning is that for some in the crowd Jesus is the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee, someone those from the tribe of Judea will find difficult to recognize as a king. It is the first of the answers to our question that rejects this new king of the Jews who has come to the city in peace, a humble king riding on donkeys. And if we will read just a little further in the Gospel of Matthew, we will discover Jesus goes to the Temple and drives out those selling animals and overturns the tables of the money changers. He declares His Father's house a house of prayer. This prophet from Nazareth directly challenges the priests who are in charge in the Temple. The priests also begin to ask the question, "Who is this?" Jesus' actions and Matthew's Gospel give us no clear answer to our question at this point. It is just like that moment for the boy in his church holding a palm branch and seeing a donkey and a rider come up the aisle. He could not get that moment out of his head. Is this just a neat event with a guy on a donkey coming up the aisle in the church? Who is this? How do we answer this question? We, like all those who witnessed Jesus' arrival, must begin to seek to find an answer to this question. We, as Methodists, have traditionally sought the answer to this question not just by sitting in a pew on Sunday morning, but by seeking to join with Jesus in his journey, in his mission to all people. Methodists have sought to be those who walk with Jesus wherever he goes. And, as we travel with him, we have sought to learn who he is. We have sought the answer to our question in holiness of thought and

life that he modeled. We have sought the answer to our question in the words of the scriptures. We have sought the answer to our question in the cries for justice of the people around us. We have sought the answer to our question by going to the places where no others would go in the power of the Holy Spirit. We as Methodists have sought the answer to this question with all our hearts, souls, and collective and individual might. We should seek the answer to our question in no less a manner today than we have since the days of revival that God brought through John Wesley in England and through others whom God called to share the Good News in America.

In this morning's scripture, we have heard many possible answers to our question, "Who is this?" Could he be a king? As heard in the cries of the people in the crowd. Could he be a prophet? As heard in the question of those in city of Jerusalem. Could he be a priest? As seen in his actions to cleanse the Temple. Could he be all three: prophet, priest, and king? We are left with our question, a question that each of us must answer, "Who is this?"

A prophet is one who speaks for God. A prophet communicates God's will for His people both for events near in time and for events later in time. Jesus is the prophet who reveals the will of his Father, our Father. Jesus is the prophet who is God in the flesh. He is the prophet who perfectly reveals God in his life. Could Jesus be just a prophet from Nazareth? Or is he the prophet, the one who reveals God's will? Is he the one who calls all people to God?

A priest is one who represents people before God in order that they may have their sins forgiven. Jesus comes to renew the Temple. Jesus comes not to represent us before God and to offer sacrifices on our behalf. Jesus comes in peace to be the perfect sacrifice that takes away our sins, that takes away the sins of the world. Jesus will become our priest who intercedes for us before God. He is our priest. Could Jesus be the new high priest?

A king is one who rules over his people. Jesus does not come to rule over us, but to extend the rule of God. Jesus comes to bring in the kingdom of God and to bring us into this kingdom through reconciliation to God. Jesus is not a human ruler who comes as a military leader, but a humble king who will bring the rule of God by his death on a cross. Could the humble donkey rider be our king?

We have a chance today to begin a journey with Jesus, a journey where we too can seek with all of our heart, soul, and might to answer the question, "Who is this?" A prophet, a priest or a king? If we have never asked ourselves this question, then today we should begin a journey with Jesus. This week we should journey with him through this last week of his time in

Jerusalem. We should ask ourselves this question as we walk with Jesus, as we hear his teaching, as we listen to his prayers, as we see him betrayed, beaten, hung on a cross, die, and his broken body laid in a tomb. We should journey with his disciples on Easter morning to an empty tomb and a risen Lord. If we are seeking Jesus just in the pews of a church, hoping to answer our question by sitting there, we must realize that our circumstances have pushed outside into the world. We are forced out into the places where Jesus is at work. In the world, we are invited to step into a journey with Jesus and, as we do so, let us share our encounters with one another so that we may help each other grow to know more fully and to live more fully our lives with the prophet, the priest, and the king. Our lives must be lived out in the world as those who are on a journey with Jesus, for it is there that we also can find an answer to the question, "Who is this?"

Pray with me: *Jesus, we are not sure how to answer the question from the crowd on Palm Sunday, "Who is this?" We confess that we are even less certain of how to journey with you to discover that answer. Jesus, will you send the Holy Spirit to guide us into a journey with you that we may learn to answer as the thief on the cross when he said to you, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom"? Help us to walk with you day by day out in your mission to all people and learn what it means to know the prophet, the priest, and the king. Amen*