“A Roller Coaster Week”

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Matthew 21:1-11 (John 18:1-19:1-16 adapted to end)

***Matthew 21:1-11***

***When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2saying 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. 3If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” 4This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet:***

***5“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.”***

***6The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; 7they brought the donkey and the colt and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. 8A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9The 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!”***

***10When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” 11The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”***

In 2006, New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, published their book, [*The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Last Days in Jerusalem*](https://www.journeywithjesus.net/BookNotes/Borg_Crossan_The_Last_Week.shtml). Borg and Crossan argue that *two* processions entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday; one from the West, Pilate, the governor and the emperor’s Roman representative and his entourage and pomp, representing power and force and control; and a second procession from the East, that of Jesus and his followers, representing the kingdom of God, peace and humility.

As I was reading this week however, commentator John Rollefson writes, “The Roman procession is Borg’s and Crossan’s *imaginary* historical reconstruction based on *non-biblical* sources.” (italics mine)

Anxious not to spread mere blog postings as fact, I immediately wondered *which part* of the triumphal entry story came from their imagination. Were there two processions? Did a Roman representative generally come to Jerusalem for Passover? So I did what any self-respecting modern day biblical scholar does, I asked Google. If you google, “Did the emperor ride into Jerusalem during Passover?” you get many different non-committal commentary, but not from a scholarly voice. Content to put this question to rest without an answer just for now, I then accidently clicked on the “images” button in Google search. There was my answer! The results were lots and lots of photos of a roller coaster! Ain’t it the truth?! In my search for the answer to *one* question related to this week of biblical joy mixed with tragedy, I found an answer to *all* of the questions about Holy Week. Trying to understand and interpret every fact and metaphor and impact of the events of this week, with all of it’s “Hosanna!”’s and crucifixions is really one giant emotional roller coaster! Palm Sunday gathers a curious mix of emotions: the joy of a festival and the fear and foreboding of danger and death. The energy of the crowd and the bewilderment at Jesus’ strange choices. What is going on? What are we meant to be feeling?

The text from Matthew that our liturgy theater portrayed for us Jesus has previously been telling his disciples what the kingdom of God will be like. As he heads toward Jerusalem he begins telling his disciples not even a dozen lines earlier, “Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; **19**then they will hand him over to the gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and on the third day he will be raised.” Jesus knows that by telling his disciples to go to the nearby village and get him a donkey and a colt, he is hastening and setting in motion, the circumstances that will lead to the truth of his previous words. Remember that Matthew is the gospel writer who emphasizes that Jesus is the continuation of and fulfillment of the scripture promises that the audience would know about. The colt and the donkey are so that Jesus will fulfill the promise of Zechariah. We aren’t supposed to care how it is that Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on both a colt and a donkey. What is important is that Jesus is announcing the coming of the kingdom of God as promised in scripture.

Jesus has accumulated people as he has been traveling toward Jerusalem. As he enters the city the crowd that enters with him is convinced that he is the one promised in scripture and he is indeed the Messiah, the anointed one, who will save them. They cut branches from the trees (in John’s gospel they are palm trees) and wave them and lie them on the path and shout “Hosanna!” Let’s try that. Take your palms and wave them high and shout “Hosanna!” “Hosanna!”

That feels good. “Hosanna” is the only ancient Aramaic word used in the new testament and it’s only used here. “Hosanna” is not the same as “alleluia” and means “save/help us, now!” What I used to think of as a cheerful day in the church, where we all celebrate by waving palms, is not after all, the crowds cheering on a victor. Yay Jesus! But it’s the crowds pleading with the one they finally hope will be able to save them from the power and authority of the Roman empire and the unfair and corrupt taxation, the unfair and corrupt rules of society and their place in it. This is not “Hosanna, yippee!” this is “Hosanna, help!” Let’s try that now. Thinking of yourselves as people who desperately hope this person is the one to finally bring about peace and safety, now take your palms and wave them high and should “Hosanna!” “Hosanna!” How does that feel? Is it the same or different from when you waved your palms a moment ago?

This is the roller coaster that is holy week. First we cry out with hope along with Jesus as he marks the beginning of the path to his death.

In the gospel of John, some time after entering Jerusalem, Jesus again prepares his followers for his death. After speaking to them, he goes away by himself and begins a prayer, “After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and begins by saying, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.” He ends this prayer by saying,

Narrator or Jesus: “Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. 26I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

Narrator: After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. 2Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. 3So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. 4Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them,

Jesus: “Whom are you looking for?”

Soldiers: “Jesus of Nazareth.”

Jesus: “I am he.”

Narrator: Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. 6When Jesus said to them, “I am he,” they stepped back and fell to the ground. 7Again Jesus asked them,

Jesus: “Whom are you looking for?”

Soldiers:  “Jesus of Nazareth.”

Jesus: “I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.”

Narrator: This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken, “I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me.” 10Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus.

Jesus: “Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?”

Narrator: So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him.

All four gospel texts tell of the many things that occur during Jesus’ time in Jerusalem, leading up to his arrest, and finally his crucifixion. As we spend time in Jerusalem with Jesus during these events this week, we begin with imagining who might be in the crowd today shouting “Hosanna!” Save us! Help us! Perhaps those who are losing much of the covid-relief health care, food assistance and housing rental relief resources that are ending as of this month. “Help us!” Perhaps the generation of children and their parents who only experience school as a frightening place where lethal danger awaits them. “Save us!” Perhaps it is the adults who doubt whether this experiment in democracy can survive the assaults bearing down on it. “Hosanna!” When Jesus told his disciples to get a donkey and a colt, he ushered in a scenario we can imagine a little too clearly. For this Jesus was arrested. Many churches will re-enact some of the scripture from this week. Many churches will have a Maundy Thursday service and include a foot washing to remember that Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. We will have the church open on Good Friday for three hours, from noon until 3pm for quiet meditation at a few prayer stations to help guide you through the scripture and impact of Jesus’ final day. Palm Sunday isn’t alleluia. Easter isn’t a resurrection without the death of good Friday. Here today as we shout “Hosanna” and wonder who we are in the crowd, we listen as our shouts of Hosanna change to shouts of “Crucify him” as we lose the certainty we had that Jesus would change the course of the power and control of life under Roman rule. When the soldiers took Jesus,

**13**First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Jesus was with Peter, so Simon Peter followed them. Peter waited outside the gate while another disciple went in with Jesus. One of the women went out of the gate and

**17**The woman said to Peter, “You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.”

The soldiers and Jewish authorities were unable to catch Jesus in anything incriminating so they then Jesus to Caiaphas himself. This time Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, “You are not also one of his disciples, are you?” He denied it and said, “I am not.” **26**One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, “Did I not see you in the garden with him? **27**Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

Narrator: (Again Peter denied it, and at that moment, the cock crowed.) Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate went out to them and said,

Pilate: “What accusation do you bring against this man?”

High Priest:“If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.”

Pilate: “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.”

High Priest/Jew: “We are not permitted to put anyone to death.”

Narrator: (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.) Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him,

Pilate: “Are you the King of the Jews?”

Jesus: “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?”

Pilate: “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?”

Jesus: “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”

Pilate: “So you are a king?”

Jesus: “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

Pilate: “What is truth?”

Narrator: After Pilate had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them,

Pilate: “I find no case against him. But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?”

Jew: (shouting) “Not this man, but Barabbas!”

Narrator: Now Barabbas was a bandit. Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and striking him on the face. Pilate went out again and said to them,

Pilate: “Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.”

Narrator: So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe.

Pilate: “Here is the man!”

Narrator: When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted,

Jews: “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

Pilate: “Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.”

Jews: “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.”

Narrator: Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, “

Pilate: Where are you from?”

Narrator: But Jesus gave him no answer.

Pilate: “Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?”

Jesus: “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.”

Narrator: From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out,

Jews: “If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.”

Narrator: When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. Pilate said to the Jews, “

Pilate: Here is your King!”

Jews: “Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!”

Pilate: “Shall I crucify your King?”

Chief priests: “We have no king but the emperor.”

Narrator: Then Pilate handed Jesus over to them to be crucified

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Amen.

John Rollefson, Feasting on the Word Series, Year A, Vol. 2, pp.152-157.

(Evidently there is a roller coaster called “The Emperor Dive” in SeaWorld in San Diego.)