

Montague Pastoral Charge  
March 24, 2024 – Palm Sunday  
Zechariah 9:9-12, Mark 11:1-11

**Sermon: “Hosanna!”**

*Timothy Wisnicki*

Here we are on Palm Sunday, also the last Sunday in Lent. I probably sound like a broken record here, but I'll say it one last time: Lent is a great season for trying new things. It's not about self-improvement, but it's about being very intentional about looking for God. Maybe you gave up chocolate for Lent, maybe you gave up Facebook; maybe you didn't give anything up but you increased your givings to a charity you really care about, or maybe you started doing morning prayers every day. Maybe you've been reading the Bible more. Or maybe you didn't get around to doing anything special – and that's OK. It's not too late, though; there's an interesting spiritual practice that goes back at least to late mediaeval times, and it doesn't demand anything other than a few minutes of your time. You can call it a “visualisation prayer.” Think of a scene from the Bible and just imagine that you're there. Really sink into the scene and imagine what you would see. Even better, imagine what you would hear, what you would smell, what you would feel. Don't be afraid to fill in the details that the Bible doesn't mention. This was a popular spiritual practice for Christians starting around the 1300s. Their favourite scene was the

crucifixion, because the text really invites us into it: we're told how Mary and the other women were there, watching, and we can imagine ourselves standing beside them. It's a powerful kind of prayer, and I really commend it to you this Holy Week, as we enter into these familiar scenes in Jerusalem. See the glint of the Roman spears, feel the heat of the midday sun on your bare skin, hear the cries from the prisoners on the crosses.

Sometimes you get new insights from that experience. As I was thinking about Palm Sunday last week, I trying to visualize it, and I was also looking at some paintings of the scene. How did the great painters imagine Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem? And I have to say, there are some great paintings of Jesus coming into Jerusalem on the donkey, but I was disappointed in every last one of them, because none of the painters got the details quite right. Because in nearly all of the paintings the donkey is walking along with his head up, trotting very determinedly towards the city gate, while all this excitement is going on around him. Fine, but not one of the artists seemed to appreciate what happens when you throw a bunch of leafy greens on the road in front of a donkey. Imagine that you're there; imagine you've come out to meet Jesus as he approaches the east gate of Jerusalem. You see a huddle of people on the road with bystanders on either side; you hear laughter, you hear shouts of

“Hosanna,” you see cloaks and greenery on the path in front of the donkey. And what is the donkey doing as he totters along? His head is down, of course! He’s munching on the palms, and just when he finishes one, there’s another tasty frond in front of him, and another, and another! Which makes this the slowest procession in human history!

Ah, but maybe the donkey is well trained, you say, but no! Mark tells us that this is a colt, a young donkey, and what’s more, this is a donkey colt that no one has ever ridden before. This poor creature couldn’t possibly know what to do. He’s stopping every few feet, he’s nibbling the palms, he’s excited and overstimulated by all the commotion, he’s passing manure... This is a painfully slow procession, and it’s comical to watch. Here is the famous Jesus, prime candidate for Messiah, tottering towards the Holy City on an undersized ass. Taking his time. He takes so much time that he doesn’t have any time to do anything in Jerusalem before sundown. According to Mark, “He entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.” And reading between the lines, he probably lost his entourage. No doubt the crowds lost patience with the pace of the procession and went home for supper, perhaps before Jesus even entered the city gate. Now it’s late, now it’s quiet. He and the 12 disciples have a look around,

then they have to go right back the way they came to spend the night in Bethany.

The crowds don’t have time for Jesus. Who has time to wait for a novice donkey to pick his way down a road full of delicious treats? It’s not just about the donkey, either: that’s the whole theme of Holy Week – that’s how he comes into his kingdom. We don’t have time for him. We try to squeeze him, rush him, restrict his mission, limit his personality, compress his meaning into categories that we can understand. The crowds cry the things that you would expect them to cry: “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” They’re saying all the right things for the coming of a king you’ve been waiting for a thousand years. The restoration of the House of David, a kingdom to overthrow the Romans and bring in a permanent peace...

The word “hosanna” isn’t just a general “hurray,” it really means “Save!” Save us, save him, God save the king... maybe all of the above. And it’s a quote from Psalm 118: “Save us, we beseech you, O Lord... Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” We in the crowds know the script, we know what a Messiah is supposed to do, and we expect Jesus to play his part well. We’ll squeeze him into that script if need be, and if he takes too long we’ll start to get annoyed.

But Jesus, of course, isn't sticking to the script. He won't let us constrain him like that. For his royal procession, he doesn't choose the text from Daniel about "the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven," he chooses the text from Zechariah: "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." The onlookers would have got the reference, and they would have understood Jesus' point straight away. They might even have cheered on this lowly king for a while. After all, it's the ultimate parody of the kind of parade you'd expect from the Roman Emperor. As the crowd starts to gather around him, it feels like fulfilled prophecy – it feels like revolution. But after an hour of prodding along the donkey as he sifts through palm fronds, the joke is starting to get a little silly. And after another hour, as the sun starts to sink in the sky and the donkey tries to lie down for a nap, it's downright irritating. And by the time the humble king finally gets to the gate, everyone has gone home, angry.

Even the disciples may be gnashing their teeth, Judas chief among them. No one really knows why Judas betrayed Jesus, but one of the best theories is that Judas was just impatient. Like anyone else in the crowd, or like any of us. Impatient for Jesus to get his show on the road, impatient for the kingdom of God, impatient for justice. If that's true, then Judas is a very

sympathetic character. Judas tries to force Jesus' hand. Back him against a wall, put him in front of the Roman governor and see what he does. Watch him call down the legions of angels and show Pilate who's really in charge here. Things should be happening fast, but Jesus is losing momentum; he's taking way too long, says Judas.

Mark's gospel is quite deliberate about that. We've talked about how Mark's favourite word is "immediately." Immediately Jesus comes out of the river and immediately a dove comes down. Immediately he heals a leper and immediately he casts out a demon...immediately this, immediately that. That's how it is at the beginning, anyway. But the closer we get to the cross, the less Mark uses his favourite word, and the more we pay attention to the passing of time. Once Jesus gets to Jerusalem, it's not "immediately" anymore. As a literary technique it's very nicely done: as the action speeds up, time seems to slow down, so that in the last chapters you get these time statements like "It was two days before the Passover...it was the first day of unleavened bread..." Time gets broader and broader, thicker and thicker, right up to the Last Supper and the Garden of Gethsemane, when we try to stay awake with the disciples through the longest night: evening, midnight, cockcrow, dawn. Precisely when we most expect Jesus to take his throne with a bang, just as we most want

God to speed up the action, God slows it down, until finally it comes to a full stop on Friday as Jesus hangs on the cross.

Jesus is taking his time, and that can't help but annoy us. We might well complain that he's taking far too long to mend this broken world. We might also complain that following him demands too much of our time, when most of us don't have any time to spare. We don't have time for ourselves and our families these days, we say, let alone Jesus. We might manage an hour or two on Sunday mornings, but we don't have time to walk the slow donkey-walk with him into his kingdom! We're all too busy for that. That's the paradox of the modern world, isn't it: we've never had so much time-saving technology, and yet we've never been so run-off our feet trying to keep up with our lives.

If Jesus wanted money we would offer it, if he delighted in a burnt offering we would give it...but *time*? That's a hard demand. We try to limit him, shorten his mission, confine him in Sunday sermons, constrain him with theory and theology. We like to think we know what he's up to this Holy Week, that we know what it's all about, and he should just hurry up and get to it. Already the Easter candy shelf at the grocery store is getting bare. We don't want to walk the slow walk with Jesus and let him unsettle our expectations.

But he resists. He will let the donkey plod slower and slower until we have to either abandon him and go make supper, or keep following and let go of our assumptions, throw away the script, and let him be the kind of king he chooses to be. We don't have time for him, and yet, he makes time for us – he insists on it. He enters into our time, our earthly moments from cradle to grave. He rules in his own way and at his own pace, and just so he gives us the gift of time. The whole life of Christ is God making time for the world, the eternal God who is beyond time and place, living our time and place, bearing with us in the heat of the day, on the slow, stony road.

The busy Jerusalem businessmen will give up on Jesus and go back into the city before the donkey-train gets there, but there are others will stay with him. The 12 disciples, whose very life is so tied up with Jesus' – they will stay. So will the women who care for him, the children he has welcomed, the beggars and prostitutes he has given dignity, the sick and the lame – they will walk at the donkey's speed because they can't do otherwise. And Jesus will carry them into the kingdom at their own pace. He doesn't hurry, he doesn't sweep away and annihilate, he comes not to save us *from* time but to *redeem* our time – indeed, he comes to *fill* our time. The sentries on the Jerusalem watchtowers will see this limping, hobbling mass lurching down the road and laugh, not knowing that this

is what the kingdom of God looks like, that this is “the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven.”

“Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

So that is the challenge today. How long will we bear with Jesus and the little donkey as they pick their way along the palm-strewn path? How long will we stand and watch Jesus hang on the cross before we turn our heads in bitter disappointment and conclude that nothing is going to happen? If there is a theme to our Holy Week this year, let it be that: as he is giving us the gift of time, that we give him our time, that we attend to him every moment, even when he is disappointing us and upsetting our expectations. Try to visualise it – do that exercise and give that time to God. Imagine yourself in Jerusalem this week. Not as if you’re watching a movie, where you’re a neutral observer – they wouldn’t have had any notion of that in the 1300s. Imagine yourself right there as a character. What do you see, what do you hear, what do you taste? How does it make you feel? Watch the procession from the city gate and ask yourself: what is this approaching? Is it a joke, or is it the power of God coming?

## Minute for Mission

### AN EASTER MESSAGE ON EDUCATION

Thank you for empowering Mission and Service partners in all forms of education.



*Credit: Photo by Aaron Burden on Unsplash*

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Over the past few months, we have shared stories centred on traditional and non-traditional education. [Mission and Service](#) recognizes the profound connection between the Resurrection story and the transformative potential of education.

This Easter, we pause to think of great sacrifices and miracles. Just as Jesus emerged from the tomb, defeating death and showing us that we can be raised to new life, education opens the mind, dispels ignorance, and fosters a deeper understanding of Christ's teachings and compassion.

Mission and Service, in its commitment to education, seeks to empower each partner to be a beacon of knowledge and

compassion in the world. With your support, we engage in mutual learning, seeking opportunities to grow our understanding of the world through the eyes of our partners. Thank you for empowering Mission and Service partners in all forms of education.

Blessings for Easter.