

To Think That I Saw It...

Matthew 21: 1-11

The story of Jesus' triumphal entry on Palm Sunday is an unusual story? One example of this is, in Matthew's version of the story, it seems that Jesus was actually riding two animals at once: a donkey and the foal of a donkey. Most unusual!

We do well to ask some questions such as "What was going on?" and "What did it mean to the first-century Jews and late first-century Christians who first read Matthew's gospel? What is the gospel writer telling us?"

Perhaps, we need to see this event with different eyes. This is not a triumphant parade such as the return of a conquering hero. Neither is it like the St. Patrick's Day marches or a ticker tape parade in New York. I suspect there is more going on in this account than you and I expect. It may well be surprising how much more is going on here than we ever thought.

This story calls to mind my favorite Dr. Seuss story -- *And to Think that I Saw It on Mulberry Street*. It's the story of young boy walking home from school where his father is waiting to ask what he had seen on his way home. The boy wanted it to be good, worth talking about, so all way home he was picturing in his mind what he would say. As we know, stories belong to the storytellers so, by the time he got close to home, the simple cart and horse he had seen had become a mammoth parade with elephants, zebras, police, and firefighters.

Stories are mostly not about what happened, but about what the events mean. The Dr. Seuss story about Mulberry Street was about this boy having a story worthy of his father's asking, worthy of their relationship. The meaning is found at another level than what actually happened.

I am suggesting that this may be true of the Matthew's Palm Sunday story as well. What Jesus was trying to show? Could this have been a type of street theater or an acted out parable? Many prophets and rabbis taught using such methods. It's also quite possible that the meaning perceived and conveyed by Matthew's gospel brings an extra layer to the actual event in Jesus' life.

What was going on in the Palm Sunday story? This morning, Crossroads joined with our sister congregations in the neighborhood for our annual "Palm Sunday in the Park." As we processed from the park back to our individuals buildings, what was going on? What was the meaning of what was going on? It's this second question that holds the richness of the experience. We were celebrating the relationship our congregations enjoy. We were proclaiming to the neighborhood that the presence of the Christian Church is alive and well here. We were preparing ourselves for the remembrance of Holy Week. There was so much going on that cannot be contained in a description of the actual events.

What was going on in this story of Jesus' triumphal entry? To be sure, there were trappings of a military parade. One might have wondered if there was an assault on Jerusalem in the works? Was Jesus coming to take over and take charge? Was this parade a show of strength? Was the kingdom of God literally marching into Jerusalem?

A hundred and fifty years before the first Palm Sunday, Simon Maccabeus entered Jerusalem after leading the Jews to victory over their Greek occupiers. That victory restored an independent Jewish state for the last time before the Roman takeover in 63 BCE. Was Jesus recreating Simon's victory march and coming as a conquering Messiah?

There is another story in the background of Palm Sunday. In the year 66 CE, well after Jesus' life yet just four years before first of the biblical gospels was written, the Jewish revolutionary Menachim won a temporary victory over the Romans. He had a victory march into Jerusalem as people waved palm branches. They hailed Menachim as a conquering hero, though the celebration was premature. By 70 CE, the year that Mark's gospel was written, the Jewish revolt had been crushed and the Jerusalem temple had been destroyed. From this example, it seems clear that Jesus was not coming as a triumphant Messiah.

There is a very different image found in the writings of the Old Testament prophet Zechariah

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
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. (Zech. 9:9)

What, then, is the gospel writer saying? How was Jesus planning to "conquer" Jerusalem and revolutionize the world? Again, it seems clear that this Palm Sunday procession illustrates a primary Gospel message that this is not a Messiah of militarism and might, but of humility. He comes not to take over by force, but to transform through self-giving love. This is a Messiah coming to lay down his life to show the depth of God's love.

How does this story speak to you and me today? What can we take home with us? One thing is certain a clarification of the image of Jesus for us. He is portrayed in the gospels as humble and counter cultural. He is not success driven. He is purpose driven to show the true nature of the universe: of God's nature and God's priorities. These priorities involve love, justice, mercy, and a spirit of inclusiveness.

Jesus does not embrace the image of a triumphant messiah. He accepts the call to make God's new creation visible. He does not come to force the acceptance of this creation. It is not a matter of power.

What do we need to hear? We need to hear that Christians should not favor violence to achieve peace. At the same time, Christians should not bury our heads in the sand passively. Those of us who are followers of Jesus, living in and by the Spirit today, are to discern and speak an alternative voice. We are to live an alternative life. We are challenged to assert strategies for non-violent approaches for national policies and to take leadership in developing non-violent and effective approaches for social change. We are to model these priorities through our existing congregational ministries and develop new ministries to share this vision.

This weekend is the anniversary of the beginning of current Iraq war. At this time, it is good for us as Christians to remember the “peace” theme of our faith. Whatever good or bad you may judge the United States’ policy to be in Iraq, war is in conflict with the gospel message. It is not in keeping with Jesus’ message. The war image apparently present in the triumphal entry has been totally subverted by the gospel writer. Rather than victory through force of arms, Jesus moves toward triumph through self-giving love. These priorities are central to the words and actions of Jesus as portrayed in the gospels. We are challenged to take them into our own words and actions.

Jesus always challenged people to move from their familiar perspectives to the perspective that he taught about God and life. He challenged people to see their faith differently and to move to a new perspective. Faith is not an excuse to stay where we are and to keep the perspective of a familiar worldview. Faith is how to see the world. Faith is a set of new eyes to see life clearly.

As we ask what there is to take with us from Palm Sunday, something besides the palms, perhaps it is this learning to see a new way? Exactly what this *seeing* means for you, you have to decide. What do you need in your life? I have been helped to see more clearly by these words of the Indian spiritual teacher Krishnamurti:

You know, when you look at a sunset or a lovely face or a beautiful leaf or a flower, when you actually see it, then there is a space between you and that flower and that beauty and loveliness, or between you and the misery and the squalor you see. There is space. You have not created it. It is there. You cannot do anything to make that space wide or narrow. It is there. But we refuse to look through that space simply, quietly, persistently. Through that space, we project our opinions, our ideas, our conclusions, our formulas, and, therefore, there is no space. That space is covered over with yesterdays, with the memories, with the experiences of yesterday. Therefore, we never see, we never listen, we are never quiet.

Faith includes how we see everything. Our faith involves how we choose to see and hear those closest to us in our families, at work, and here in church. Faith involves how we choose to see the role of the Spirit in our everyday lives and how we perceive that Spirit working in the world. It also involves our choices in terms of cooperating with that work in light of our gifts, the calling we feel, and in our work, ministry, and relationships.

Do you have some thoughts about this new seeing? Write them down. Share them with your neighbor now or commit yourself in prayer to taking action on your thoughts.

I invite you to see the Palm Sunday story, indeed the entire passion week story, in light of the movement of the Spirit in our world, in your life and mine. I encourage you to make time to connect through the Spirit with those closest to you. Really see them. Really be aware of them.

The journey we're on is real - the most real thing in the world. We are walking with the Spirit, walking in step with God's purposes in the universe. The Spirit invites us on the journey step by step.