

*What Good Does It Do?*  
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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

### Introduction to the Morning Lesson

There is something a little funny in today's text which is Matthew's version of Jesus entering Jerusalem on what we now remember as Palm Sunday. We all know the story that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. He did so because that's how the Old Testament describes Israel's king as entering the holy city. By riding in on a donkey Jesus was unmistakably claiming to be Israel's king. It was a bold political act.<sup>1</sup> But that's not the funny part.

Matthew says that the disciples brought Jesus a donkey and a colt and they "put their cloaks on them, and [Jesus] sat *on them*." It looks like Matthew describes Jesus riding two donkeys at the same time like some trick rider in a wild west show. That would have looked funny. Even funnier, however, at least for preachers, is reading scholars arguing with each other about how to make better sense of what Matthew wrote.

One explanation is that Matthew didn't understand Hebrew poetry. One of major characteristics of Hebrew poetry is a kind of parallelism: one line makes a statement and the next line says the same thing in different but parallel words. For example, Psalm 24 begins:

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it.

Those lines are not saying two different things but the same thing two different ways. Here's another example from Psalm 25.

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.  
O my God, in you I trust;  
do not let me be put to shame;  
do not let my enemies exult over me.

Two lines in parallel express one thought.

So Matthew quotes a line of poetry from the prophet Zechariah who tells Jerusalem to rejoice because her king is coming:

Humble and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zechariah 9.9b)

Given the pattern of parallel poetry, Zechariah was probably not talking about two different donkeys but the same donkey in two different ways. Perhaps Matthew misunderstood that.<sup>2</sup>

That would be a bit strange, however, for the author of Matthew's Gospel was steeped in the Old Testament and its patterns of writing. Perhaps a better explanation is that Matthew intentionally took the parallelism to refer to two different donkeys in order to make a symbolic point. Because the donkey was a coronation animal, riding a donkey into Jerusalem was clearly to claim royal status as descendant of King David. To ride a more humble colt represented Jesus' lowly

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006) 182.

<sup>2</sup> The other three gospels clearly put Jesus on one donkey. Mark 11.7: "Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it." Luke 19.35: "Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it." John 12.14: "Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it."

servant role.<sup>3</sup> Matthew appears to have wanted to say both without worrying about the details of how Jesus would ride two animals at the same time. Jesus is the king who serves humbly and whose throne is the cross. Let's read it in Matthew 21.

Matthew 21.1-11 (NRSV)

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."

## Introduction

When the morning lesson ends at verse 11 it is obviously not the end of the story. There was a wonderful parade — everyone loves a parade. But immediately after entering Jerusalem, Matthew tells us that Jesus went to the temple. There he chased out the money changers because they had turned sacred space into commercial space. Then, because it was already late, he left the temple and the city and walked a couple of miles to spend the night at Bethany with some friends. Just knowing that much, even if we didn't know the rest of the story, we would guess that something big was about to happen.

What was the big thing towards which all these little things were building? The obvious, literal answer, of course, is that crucifixion soon follows and on the third day resurrection. We know the story of Holy Week. But what do all of these things really mean for you and me? That's what I want to grapple with this morning. Matthew has set the scene for something big. But what difference does it make for you and me? What good does it do?

## What good does it do?

I mean what good does it do to come to church and worship and all that sort of thing? Think of it this way. The preacher sits down after the sermon, the hymnals and Bibles are closed, the choir

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 234-235.

is finished, the benediction given, and the response sung. Then you leave. You have been to church and worshiped. It was enjoyable enough, you think to yourself — the preacher was okay, the music was good, you probably talked to some friends afterwards. But a nagging question tugs at your brain. You may try to put it aside, to keep alive the sounds and sights of the worship service, but it won't leave you. It is this: what good did it do?

The prayers, the preacher, the songs, the children, the simple sanctuary and its beautiful stained glass — what good did any and all of these things do? The world to which you return after worship looks exactly like the one you left. The sun is a bit higher and more people are stirring about, but it's still the same world. You have your same problems, the same things to do in the afternoon, the same challenges ahead. On a bigger scale there are also the same poor to be fed, the same wars to be ended, and the same crises in our world. Was this hour of worship only a fantasy or an escape? What good does it do?

I mean, why have all the bother and fuss and expense of churches at all? Why organs and choirs and musicians? Why preachers, ushers, Sunday school teachers, and all the rest? Why do we get dressed up on Sundays and put real flowers in the sanctuary when plastic ones would do as well for less money? Or maybe we don't need flowers at all. We live in a pragmatic, no-nonsense world and "what good does it do?" is an important question. Some would say worship is just a waste of time. Why go to all the fuss?

I think the Palm Sunday story helps us answer that question. We celebrate today Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. His little band of disciples became a multitude as they neared the capital city. Jesus, who had walked before them, now rode on a donkey. They stripped off their cloaks and placed them upon a donkey, or maybe on two animals.

They recalled the prophetic words that the king will ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. They even cover the road with their cloaks. Others climb the palms and cut branches, waving them in greeting: "Hosanna!" It's a parade, a ticker-tape entry into the capital, Israel's most festive season of Passover made more festive by the wild, exuberant entry of this One who comes in the name of the Lord. Everyone was excited and happy.

They were excited and happy because there was hope. If a king really did come, there was hope. Hope that tomorrow wouldn't have to be the same as yesterday. Hope that their lives wouldn't continue in misery brought about by Roman oppression. Hope that God would bless them. When there is hope, there is excess. There is extravagance. When people get intoxicated with hope, they do wild and crazy things. They sing. They dance. They shout. They worship. They praise God.

It's very much like being in love. Love is extravagant and excessive. When you go to a wedding you expect to see beautiful clothes and flowers and music and laughing and kissing. People in love tend towards extravagance. They sing, write poetry, change their hair styles, cry, shout, dance. They are subject to the wildest, most extreme shifts of mood. A careless word from their beloved throws them into a sad tizzy. A momentary glance from the object of their affection hurls them into ecstasy.

That's the way love is — excessive. We send our beloved a dozen — maybe more — red roses. What good does that do anybody except the florist? We kiss. Hygienically very questionable. Love isn't about what is sensible. Love is excess. The pragmatic question "What good does it do?" is laughable to lovers. It's the wrong question to ask of the singing, kissing, and dancing. Love leads to

extravagance.

Here's the point — and it's at the very center of it all, the center of Sunday, the center of worship, the center of the whole meaning of Holy Week. The point is that "We love because [God] first loved us." (1 John 4.19) Our excessiveness in worship is the excess of love. Worship is a way of being in love.

Why do we baptize and sing and worship and pray and do that all together? After all, you've heard it before and seen it before. There are very few totally original sermons or even totally original music. Why do it? Because we acting out love. It's the way we experience love and hope. Why do brides and grooms laugh and hug and kiss? They've done those things before. But they do it because that's the way love is. We worship and sometimes go to a little excess because that's the way God's love is.

When Jesus arrived at the temple on that long ago Sunday, I imagine he thought about all that had gone on before: all the history of the Hebrew people, all the wonder and all the suffering. He thought about their wanting a king like David had been. And I imagine that he left the temple that Palm Sunday night thinking that in a few days all those yesterdays would be transformed into a new tomorrow.

Dear friends, that transformation is why we worship. When we are done, when we leave here, we really are not the same as when we came. For we have come in love. We've enacted and celebrated the habits of love. We've been a little extravagant. We have royally wasted time because we've been with our King.<sup>4</sup> That has changed us for the better. What good does it do? Ask any bride or any groom.

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<sup>4</sup> An image developed at length by Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999).