

## **“How Many Donkeys?” – Matthew 21:1-11 – April 5, 2020**

As we have been looking at Matthew’s gospel over the last several months, starting right before Christmas, we have seen over and over that the writer of this gospel tells the good news about Jesus by often pointing out how something that happened was a fulfillment of prophecy. These ongoing references are especially noticeable when reading larger chunks of the gospel in one sitting, such as what we have been doing throughout this season of Lent in our Wednesday noon Zoom gatherings. Often Matthew reflects on an element of Jesus’ story by noting that such and such happened in order to fulfill what the prophet said. Matthew uses these references to clarify and emphasize Jesus’ identity as the Messiah. Today’s familiar Palm Sunday story is no exception.

This story of Jesus’ arrival in the city of Jerusalem is recounted in all four gospels, but there is one striking difference here in Matthew’s gospel. This is the only gospel that says that Jesus rode on two donkeys. Here it is again. Jesus sends two disciples to go into the village, and tells them, “you’ll find a donkey and her colt tied up. Bring them to me.” Matthew comments that this happened to fulfill the what had been spoken through the prophet, “Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The disciples find the animals, bring them back, put their cloaks on their backs, and then Jesus sat on THEM.

Matthew here is quoting from Zechariah, an oracle that portrays God, a victorious and peaceful king, coming into Jerusalem, having vanquished the enemies of Israel. But the original text wasn’t actually describing two animals. The original Hebrew scriptures often used poetic parallelism, where one line of scripture is repeated with some enhancement. So, in this case, “the king is coming, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” – just one donkey, referred to twice. Now, as versed in Scripture as Matthew is, he would have known that. He would have understood, there was only one donkey in the original passage. So why would he, not only interpret it as two, but actually give us a very awkward image of Jesus trying to ride two?

Now this has been an issue that scholars have debated for ages. And the scholars know way more about scripture than I do. But as I was rereading this passage, and thinking about it in our current setting, its oddity really stuck out to me. Probably because we are living in a very odd time.

And what came to me is this. Matthew is covering all his bases. The writing of this gospel of Jesus is not supposed to be a biography, exposing multiple vignettes in the life of Jesus. It is rather, a theological document, with the purpose of identifying who Jesus is. He is the Messiah, and if there is the slightest question about the fulfillment of any one prophesy, Matthew is going to show that Jesus fulfilled them. Is there one donkey, but the slightest possibility there may be two? All right, let’s include them both. Literal accuracy isn’t important

to Matthew. Theological expediency is. Matthew had no doubt that Jesus was the Messiah, and he was going to show that Jesus fulfilled every Messianic prophecy, even if it seemed a bit excessive.

I used the idiom "cover all the bases" here, which means to prepare for any possibility. This exaggeration of having two donkeys was Matthew's way of covering all the bases. He wasn't going to leave anything to chance. For him, that was of utmost importance, so that his readers truly understood that Jesus was the Messiah.

This never really made sense to me, until now. In this time of pandemic, we are living within a scenario that is constantly calling into question everything we once thought of as normal - causing us to reexamine all our daily activities and assess them for the risk of exposing ourselves to the Covid-19 virus. Because of how important this situation is, we are making sure that we are covering all the bases in order to keep ourselves and our families and our communities as safe as possible. We are leaving nothing to chance. And that includes how we celebrate Holy Week this year.

So in the comfort and safety of our homes, we can imagine waving our palm branches as we sing our Palm Sunday hymns in celebration of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But we also think about the poignancy of this coming week, remembering the last days of Jesus. He showed us a Messiah who didn't come into the city with a sword or an army, but peacefully and with a message of love and justice, championing those who live on the margins. We think about how quickly the joyous parade turned into a crowd howling for blood.

And we can imagine those for whom Jesus still comes and journeys to the cross – the ill and the dying who face these days without friends or family. The people around the world and in our community who do not have a safe place to hunker down. The millions of people out of work and their families. The young people who will not walk across the platform to receive their diplomas this spring. Those who live alone and long for the caring touch of another human being. Those who live without hope. Those who live in fear. Those who have nowhere to escape abusive home situations.

And we think of those through whom the love of Jesus now comes – the health care workers who risk themselves for the lives of others. The essential workers who keep the supply chain functioning. The first responders and volunteers who care for the vulnerable. The friends and neighbors who bring joy to others. The parents and guardians who juggle work, home schooling, and care giving. For all who spread joy, love and hope in a time of uncertainty.

Today, we once again enter into that week we call Holy. The setting may be different for us, but the destination remains unchanged. Let us walk with Jesus.