

“Here Comes Jesus”
Matthew 21:1-11
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Palm Sunday
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Here comes Jesus from the east looking a lot like the king predicted by the prophet Zechariah. “He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem,” the prophet predicted, “and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations.” With promises like that, it’s no wonder that a crowd gathered that day and lay down palm branches. It’s no wonder a crowd gathered to watch Jesus. That crowd was accustomed to the brutal reign of Rome, a reign that maintained the peasant status of 90% of the population with control and fear. Here comes Jesus riding on a humble animal - a donkey, a colt, or both if you go with Matthew’s awkward telling,¹ looking like a king without the usual imperial trappings.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, another procession was entering Jerusalem that day, according to scholars Marcus Borg & John Dominic Crossan. The Roman governor, a man named Pontius Pilate, rode in from the west.² We don’t know if there was a crowd for Pilate. If anyone showed up for him, it would have been out of fear - not out of choice. Pilate’s brutal reputation preceded him.³ Humility was not part of his procession. He rode in on a war horse, accompanied by a phalanx of Roman soldiers and the subtle threat of violence that every occupying force carries with it.

Unlike Jesus’ *surprising* entrance, Pilate’s arrival was *predictable*. The scholars call it “standard practice” for Roman governors of Judea to be in Jerusalem for the major festivals in case there was trouble. “Expanded police presence” would have flashed across the highway signs if they’d had them. The Passover was especially worrisome for the Roman powers since Passover tells the story of the deliverance of Jews from imperial oppression. Couple that narrative with the

¹ Scholars posit that Matthew was reading from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) which incorrectly translated a Hebrew poetic couplet “riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” to “riding on a donkey, *and* on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Regardless of Matthew’s intent, the effect is to make clear an explicit connection between the prophecy of Zechariah and the coming of Jesus.

² Marcus Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus’ Last Week in Jerusalem* (New York: HarperCollins), 2006, p. 2. Borg and Crossan are sparse in their notes which is my only disappointment with this book. I do know if they are speculating on this western procession or have actual historical accounts that corroborate their story. In other words, if the Pilate procession *likely happened* based on historical evidence or if they have witnesses that marked it occurring this way that year.

³ Pilate’s brutality was noted by Tacitus, Philo, and Josephus as James Carroll notes. Carroll argues that the Gospels intentionally soften Pilate’s character while strengthening the enemy status of the Jewish leadership to protect the church that produced the Gospels from coming under direct attack by Rome. James Carroll, *Jerusalem, Jerusalem: How the Ancient City Ignited Our Modern World*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), 2011, p. 85.

number of pilgrims arriving in Jerusalem for the Passover: 200,000 pilgrims descending on a city of just 40,000 inhabitants,⁴ and you can feel the electricity in the air. The city was throbbing with expectation.

When you know the context, it's easy to see the showdown that Jesus provokes: the humble peasant Jew proclaiming the arrival of God's kingdom vs. the Roman Emperors who had been claiming the title "Son of God" for decades, since Augustus first claimed that his father was none other than the god Apollo.⁵ Jesus announcing a kingdom where the last shall be first and the first, last, contesting Roman ideology that taught the opposite. Jesus *provokes* this showdown. The whole thing is planned. He tells his disciples exactly what he needs and where to find it. Jesus intends to provoke a reaction.

Which is kind of surprising since the church has done its best through the ages to dampen exactly this kind of confrontation. Maybe that's why it's been so hard for us to see it in the text. The church is supposed to stay out of politics, we've been told. Faith is about spiritual ideas, not political things. It's about heavenly thoughts, not earthly concerns. But here comes Jesus, claiming to be king or lampooning the emperor or maybe a little bit of both. Here comes Jesus announcing a choice – between an economy of neighborliness or an economy of haves and have nots. Between security that is built on human connection or security defended with the sword. Between power that comes from obedience to the God of liberation, or power that comes from obedience to earthly tyrants. Here comes Jesus announcing a choice.

And it's stunning to me that Jesus' disciples make the choice to go along with this. They've got to know that you cannot confront Roman authorities like this and get away with it. They must know how dangerous this is because it's been tried before. 4 years before Jesus was born, Jews revolted in Israel. Roman violence was swift and furious. In Galilee an entire village was burned and its survivors sold into slavery. In Jerusalem, 2,000 of its defenders were crucified at the same time.⁶ 2,000. Why would Jesus' disciples go along with this? They have the most to lose. Why go along with this?

It's an important question, at least for people who have something to lose. It's not at all surprising that the peasant crowds welcome Jesus with open arms. Here comes a fearless leader promising them liberation from the disappointing politics of the status quo. Here comes a fearless leader promising them freedom from the arrangements that keep them dependent on the scraps from the tables of their oppressors. Here comes a leader promising them release from the fear of the violence that can be unleashed on anyone on the wrong side of power. It's not at all surprising that *the peasants wave their palms*, fanning the flames of revolution. They've got the most to gain. It's easy to embrace someone making grand promises

⁴ Borg & Crossan 18.

⁵ Borg & Crossan 3.

⁶ Borg & Crossan 15. Remember, too, that the Gospel of Matthew was written after the terrible destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. when thousands more Jews were killed and the Temple leveled by the Roman army leaving only the western wall of the Temple mount behind.

when you feel things can't get any worse. It's easy to take a risk on someone making big promises when you don't have much to lose.

But the disciples – they've got a clear choice – they can *choose* to stand with Jesus in this confrontation, or keep their heads down. They can *choose* to help Jesus expose the brutality of the empire or blend in with the crowds. They have the luxury of *choosing* which makes them a lot like us -

- people like us who can choose whether to stand with our Muslim neighbors or let them suffer from expanding hate. People like some of us who can choose to empathize with immigrants living here, or turn our backs on their fear. Like some of us who can choose whether we want hear the experience of transgender youth or force them to conform to our experience without ever knowing them. Like some of us who can choose whether we want to see the way white privilege has birthed some of us on 3rd base before others of us have ever reached 1st or whether we want to pretend that we are entirely self-made.⁷ Why embrace a kingdom that might cost you more than you are likely to gain? Why embrace an ethic that might require sacrifices that no one wants to make? Why go along with this palm procession when history is pretty clear about where it leads?

It's the choice the Gospels confront us with, I'm afraid. The choice between Jesus' neighborly ethic that refuses to buy into our immigrant-fearing, missile launching, hate-spewing, church bombing, zero-sum fueled world and the status quo that we are afraid to divest from. Yes, Jesus often allies himself with the poor and the oppressed. That's true. But the Gospels often target those of us in the middle – those of us in between the brutal power of Pilate and the innocence of the peasant crowd. People with some power and some privilege and some choices. People who struggle enough to see that what Jesus promises is good and hopeful, but who benefit enough from empire to resist going all in with Jesus. People like the Pharisees – navigating that difficult space between the power of Empire and the power of the people. People like the disciples – people who start out without much but quickly get tempted into a little more power, a little more authority.

The Gospels often target the people in between. Because it's really not that hard to accept Jesus' showdown with power if you're already on the bottom – there's nothing to lose. It's nearly impossible to accept Jesus' showdown if you're on the top with everything to lose. But those of us in the middle – well, we've got choices to make.

The disciples choose to assist Jesus and his procession – they go get the donkey and the colt which honestly doesn't seem like a big deal in relationships to God's grand schemes. They get a donkey and a colt. They bring them to Jesus. What's so significant about that?

But it's those smaller choices that assist God's larger showdown. It's those smaller choices that don't always seem like a big deal that begin to clarify God's grand schemes. A co-worker drops disparaging words about someone he's named

⁷ Chuck Collins, great-grandson of Oscar Meyer, who gave away all \$500,000 of his inheritance, uses this metaphor to talk about the way privilege compounds similar to capital in his book, *Born on Third Base: A One Percenter Makes the Case for Tackling Inequality, Bringing Wealth Home, and Committing to the Common Good*, (Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing), 2016.

as “other” – do you choose to confront him when you’ve got nothing personal to gain? A member of your extended family rolls out those anti-Semitic tropes – do you speak up when you’ve got nothing to gain, but plenty to lose? The homeless man asks you for something to eat – do you look him in the eye when it only exposes you to risk? It’s those smaller choices that clarify the clash of kingdoms that God has promised is already on its way.

I got that clarity a couple of weeks ago listening to a cardio-pulmonologist sharing her story with a group of fellow faith leaders from the largest population centers up and down the east coast and to the Great Lakes. “I walked into the patient’s room and said cheerfully as I had been trained to do, ‘Good morning. My name is Merehan. I’ll be taking care of you today. How are you feeling?’” But the patient didn’t see Merehan’s pleasant face, or kind words. She only saw the hijab that this young Muslim woman was wearing. “You’re one of *them*.” the patient snarled, while cable news blared in the background. “You’re one of those terrorists, aren’t you?” she said. “I will not be cared for by one of them” she yelled with racist obscenities. The patient pulled out her bed pan and slug it across the room covering Merehan in her feces. My friend, Bishop Miles, an African-American pastor, leaned over to me and said, “that’s how some white people used to treat our wives and our mothers.”

In that moment I saw a choice – not just a choice of how I might vote in an election or what public policies I might support or reject, but a personal choice of where I choose to place myself when Jesus comes to town. Where am I going to place myself when Jesus makes it clear that he’s ready for a confrontation? A confrontation between a kingdom built on fear, and the threat of violence, and a world built on love, and connection, and self-giving.

So the question today is for you to think about a time when you got caught in a conflict between the way of Jesus and the way of this world. What choice did you make? Where did it lead?