



“SACRED SEMANTICS”
SCRIPTURE PSALM 118: 1-2, 19-29; MATTHEW 21: 1-11
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
April 9, 2017

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Matthew 21:1-11

21:1 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples,

21:2 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.

21:3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately."

21:4 This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

21:5 "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."

21:6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them;

21:7 they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.

21:8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

21:9 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!"

21:10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"

21:11 The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

No winning campaign of a sports team would be complete without bandwagon fans—you know the type—the ones who didn't pay their dues, who didn't suffer

through losing seasons and stay loyal to their team. The ones who just show up when things are going well and claim they are real fans.

Hardcore fans, loyal fans look at the bandwagon fans as imposters, posers, as fake fans—they scoff that those bandwagon fans just like the team because they are winning-- that's not real loyalty or real commitment, that's not true love.

Real commitment, real loyalty is in it for the long haul, through good times and bad, through losses and wins. This delineating of true fans and fake fans based on what one is willing to endure surfaces around championship times—perhaps there has been similar moral indignation in the Tar Heel state in the last week or so.

Moral indignation from the real fans about these imposter fans is an interesting thing for us to consider today in church—on a day when we ritually remember and even celebrate one of the most pronounced and profound moments of bandwagon jumping the world has ever seen.

The crowd in the Holy City of Jerusalem heralds the triumphant entry of a king who they are convinced will fix all their problems, right all the wrongs. They cheer a king they think they see, a king they want to see—a winner in the mold of winners they've grown to long for in their lives.

We remember and celebrate this moment today in the church year all the while knowing what lies ahead, aware that we are making our way down a road that leads us to this same king's brutal, violent execution, put into motion by the same crowd: a crowd who so quickly jumped from one bandwagon of Jesus as King to the next bandwagon of Jesus as criminal.

So, this does seem like a good time for us to take a closer look at this bandwagon impulse that seems to be wired into our humanity.

It's understandable, maybe even rational, this jumping on the bandwagon habit of human kind—who wouldn't want to be associated with a winner instead of a loser. It may be a base kind of self-interest that fuels this ability we have to conjure up affection for a winner because they make us feel like a winner, too, especially in a competitive culture like ours.

In the cosmic game of musical chairs, we want to have a place to sit down, a way to belong, a way to win.

This impulse to ally with winners is a glimpse of something quite dangerous in the way we humans are wired.

We are fearful creatures—and we’d sometimes rather feign love for someone because they are winning or conjure up hate for someone who is perceived as a loser, than get caught up in a losing proposition and find ourselves rejected, even reviled. And the ease with which human beings can abandon beliefs and principals to get proximity to a winner is chilling when that winner is someone who is destructive and nefarious. Human beings seem to be able to overlook profound moral bankruptcy when someone is a winner.

Within everyone of us is the impulse to jump on the bandwagon that we think will assure us the victory we value the most—be it fame, fortune, popularity, belonging, justice, salvation, or even love.

This impulse may be morally questionable, but we must also attend to the fact that at its root this impulse comes from a fragile place within us that does not want to be rejected or alone. This vulnerable place within us is a fearful place—where we fear we are unlovable and will end up ultimately unloved.

All four Gospels account for Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, but Matthew’s rendition is unique for a few reasons. The Gospel writer wants to make sure the reader understands the symmetry of this event with prophecy and messianic expectation.

And to a Gospel writer with an eye toward rabbinic writing and tradition the import of this symmetry boiled down to one thing—Jesus’ identity as Messiah.

A scholarly curiosity has persisted when it comes to Matthew’s version of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. Why does this Gospel writer, this writer with such an exacting eye for how Jesus fulfills prophecy, translate the Hebrew verses from Zechariah 9 in a way that appears to be incorrect? The Hebrew poetry of Zechariah 9 tells of a humble king “riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” This repetition about the donkey is a poetic mechanism used to create vivid and powerful images. This repetition in Zechariah does not suggest the existence of two animals, but one animal. And that one animal carried with it a strong message of what kind of king we are dealing with.

Even though the Gospel writer most certainly knew of this poetic mechanism in Hebrew writing, he translates this passage literally. The gospel writer has Jesus riding on two different animals—a donkey and a colt. Why this curious way of connecting Jesus to the prophecy of Zechariah?

We can only conjecture that these sacred semantics speak to us from across the generations from a sense of urgency, maybe even a fear, that the power of this moment could be somehow lost on humanity—after all we are a fickle species.

Matthew wants no doubts that this is that king—the king of Zechariah’s oracle—the king who comes not on a warhorse after a victorious battle, but a humble, gentle king entering Jerusalem in such a way that signaled not aggression and dominance, but peace and tenderness. This is the king that prophet foretold.

The crowd cheers for a king they think they see while not seeing the king who is actually there in front of them.

That same crowd, in just a few days time, unleashes violence to kill the one who showed them something they didn’t want to see: that their salvation will not be secured through might, through aggression, through dominating power, but through a suffering God who shows us the power of losing everything for the sake of love.

What a harsh image for creatures like us—creatures who flock to dominating power, to power that we tell ourselves will make us safe and secure, to power that tells us we are justified in building our victories on the backs of those who deserve their defeat, and of forgetting what we believe in or even who we love to share in the sweet victory of a winner.

And then Jesus’ body looks back at us with something that is so radically different that it is almost impossible for us to see.

He looks back at us, the image of humility and gentleness, the image of suffering and death, even of ridicule and execution—and tells us: your king has arrived.

Take that in for a minute—to say the arrival of such a king is disappointing is a ridiculous understatement. It is devastating to us human beings—wired for bandwagons and winners, for popularity and trending objects of our affection. To be told that the king we’ve been waiting for is not the king of our dreams, but a king who shows us our shadows and invites us to tell the truth about ourselves and what we are afraid of does not feel like good news.

It feels like a lot for us to take in—this reversal, this radical shift in how we’ve learned to cope in this world.

Perhaps we need some time—a few days to let it sink in, that the God who calls us is a God who does not fix everything for us the way we had hoped, the way we had planned. But instead, the God who calls us, suffers with us—and is the object of mistaken identity by so much of the world around us.

Implicit bias means we see what we expect to see. Implicit bias is the mechanism in our brain that helps to form our attitudes of racism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heterosexism. It helps to embed things like materialism in us as well. Our

brains want us to have short cuts to make the world easier to navigate. We are taught to have a bias against those things that deviate from the norms that have taught us how to survive, how to belong.

And such biases help to color in the lines of our fears—our deepest fears of being rejected, being left behind, being alone, forgotten.

Just like Jesus was.... alone, rejected, betrayed, dismissed as a throw away person—another criminal better off dead than alive who wanted to speak to us about things we don't want to hear.

Sacred semantics that seek to teach us, to startle us, to orient us into seeing Jesus for who he truly was, for who he truly is speak to us from Psalm 118 as well. The question is do we know how to hear and receive this mysterious and divine language of faith?

This Psalm is a celebration of deliverance, a psalm of thanksgiving for God's steadfast love during exile.

But, more than that, this Psalm is the celebratory processional of a people who have learned the true meaning of righteousness.

Righteousness is not about legalism, or moral purity, or even about always doing the right thing or always following the rules.

Righteousness is about putting God at the center of your life—through good times and bad times, through suffering and delight.

Righteousness is about knowing God, seeing God, feeling God at the center of life—at the center of all things.

The essence of God's nature, of God's character is steadfast love.

See what lengths God will go for those God loves?

"The most famous man you'd never heard of" is a man who was hungry for fame, for notoriety.¹ He did a little bit of everything in his day—song, dance, traveling circus shows.

He got his start performing in 1841 with a talking pig, Sybil. And from there he drew audiences for everything from burlesque Shakespearean acts to amazing animal acts to blackface minstrel shows. He did equestrian shows, had an elephant named Lalla

and a trained rhinoceros. Dan Rice, born Dan McClaren, would do pretty much anything to be famous.

His life was a series of booms and busts—he would get rich and then lose it all, and then repeat the process. He is the origin of the phrase “one horse show” because he lost all of his money and had to sell all of his horses but continued to perform with one horse.

After seeing Rice perform, presidential candidate Zachary Taylor asked Rice to join him on the campaign trail. Rice paraded Taylor around on his circus bandwagon drawing crowds. When other members of Taylor’s party saw the popularity, they fought to get on Rice’s wagon, too. Many candidates got their own bandwagons to replicate the popular attention-getting strategy of Rice for Taylor, giving birth to the phrase that now names the opportunistic impulse of human beings to clamor to associate ourselves with winners—jump on the bandwagon.

Taylor won the presidency and Rice, himself, went on to run for president in 1867. And celebrity politics was born.² His racism was part of his signature act—from blackface to a pro-slavery comic version of Uncle Tom’s Cabin he performed to political stances that allied him to the confederacy. He dropped out before the election because he knew he was going to lose. But, not before his white goatee and suit of stars and stripes inspired the iconic mythic figure, Uncle Sam.

Later in life, Rice became a heavy drinker, then in recovery he became a speaker in the temperance movement. His later efforts to re-launch his circus career never took off. Failing in his attempts to find investors for all his newly concocted business ventures his last attempt to make a name for himself was selling snake oil. He died after three failed marriages in the home of his cousin.

That drive to be known, to count, to register on the Richter scale of a world that keeps score is powerful—powerful enough to make us compromise principals, powerful enough to make us overlook all kinds of moral questions, powerful enough to justify even morally reprehensible strategies for success.

Look no further than the world of big-time sports for how profound this idol of winning is. A coach who wins can literally get away with anything. We’ve seen it first hand—at the highest levels of the game from violating laws to violating the rights of others to getting away with cheating that destroys lives and violates all kinds of principals—ethical, institutional, and moral.

Everyone loves a winner—and such love can enable a eerily easy ignorance of the moral lapses that often enable someone to win in the first place.

As tempting as it is to jump on the bandwagon of the winners in this world, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem calls us a back to a chilling reality. The life of faith is not about winning. In fact, it can mean we might lose everything the world tells us should matter. Christians can't be bandwagon people and be true to the Christ who goes ahead of us to the cross.

What we remember today is nothing short of a reckoning for human kind. It should unsettle us to see the lengths that true love will go for us—even for us, those blinded by the bright lights of fame—of the yearning to be known, to be significant, to make an impact in a way the world values.

God's love is steadfast because its very character, its very essence is eternal—God does not love us one minute, and drop us the next. God does not jump on the bandwagon when things are going our way and jump off when things fall apart.

Jesus enters Jerusalem resolved to show us once and for all, God's steadfast love endures forever, even if it means losing everything. God's love will never, ever, ever let us go.

Our king has arrived, ready to do whatever it takes to show us that our salvation will not be secured through might, through aggression, through dominating power, through bombs or through dollar bills or through billboards that flash our name.

Our salvation comes through a suffering God willing to lose everything for us—because true love counts losing for the sake of its beloved to be the most powerful victory of all.

Thanks be to God.

¹ <http://www.app.com/story/news/local/monmouth-county/2015/04/05/weird-nj-jumping-dan-rice-bandwagon/25324423/>

² <https://blog.oup.com/2016/08/origins-american-celebrity-politics/>