

## **Matthew 21:1-17:**

### **Introduction:**

Well, friends.

Our Church calendar and our walk through Matthew's Gospel don't quite jive. So here we are, back to the passage that Palm Sunday remembered, what, two weeks ago? Three. Only a week passes between today's passage and the end of Matthew's Gospel, but there's six more chapters of the thing. Jesus' last few days are busy ones.

So today we're look at Palm Sunday again. We'll look at a passage that is deeply, deeply misunderstood, and leveraged as justification for all sorts of flawed practices. We'll talk about Scripture as we see it used. Let's pray it goes well.

### **Prayer:**

#### **Almost There:**

***As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."***

**4 This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:**

**5 “Say to Daughter Zion,  
‘See, your king comes to you,  
gentle and riding on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”[a]**

**6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. 7 They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on.**

Jesus sends the two nameless disciples for a couple of donkeys. We don't know how he knows they're there, but his knowledge is more than his usual insight; it's a little miracle, really. And he tells these two to say to the owner of the donkeys that the “Lord needs them”--the only time Jesus uses the term, a term used throughout the ancient Greek text of the Bible for God.

Jesus is making a statement. He's fulfilling a prophecy, a God-given prediction. Matthew lets us know what it is; it's from Zechariah 9, a passage where Jerusalem is told to rejoice because their king is coming to them.

But their king isn't coming in military might with a cavalry, the way the Romans came. His isn't a show of military force;

it's a show of peace, and it's one that's going to go past Israel, and out into the world. Zechariah says, immediately after what Matthew quotes:

***10 I will take away the chariots from Ephraim  
and the warhorses from Jerusalem,  
and the battle bow will be broken.  
He will proclaim peace to the nations.  
His rule will extend from sea to sea  
and from the River to the ends of the earth.***

In choosing to enter Jerusalem this way, instead of arming the crowd and taking the city, or having the band play *Pomp and Circumstance*, Jesus is doubling-down on all that rejection of worldly power that we saw in the previous two chapters, he's pointing out that his reign is a reign driven by humility and peace, he's hinting at it the way it's for the "ends of the earth," the nations - the gentiles - not just the locals, and he's claiming Messianic promises for himself in an incredibly bold way.

***Getting it. Sort of.***

The crowd gets it. Sort of. They lay down their coats and palm branches as they start shouting:

***"Hosanna[b] to the Son of David!"***

***"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"[c]***

***“Hosanna[d] in the highest heaven!”***

We read this, and think it sounds nice, right? We’ve got “Hosannas” in our praise songs and our hymns. It’s church-y. Some of us know that the word is a plea, or a command, really: “Save Us! Deliver Us! Free us!”

But these people aren’t making “Hosanna!” up. They’re quoting from a really famous psalm, Psalm 118. It was incredibly well known. In it, the Psalmist is praising God because of victory God has given him; and he’s entering into Jerusalem, entering through the city gates and up to the Temple after an amazing military victory he describes in the first part of the Psalm. Psalm 118 reads,

***25 Lord, save us! Lord, grant us success!  
26 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.  
From the house of the Lord we bless you. 27 The Lord is God, and he has made his light shine on us. With [branches] in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar.***

And these people quote it: “Hosanna!” “O Lord, save us.”

They are the ones with branches in hand, laying them on the ground. By singing this song and laying those branches, they are claiming that right now Psalm 118 is coming true in a new way. Israel’s military champion has arrived! And when the crowd shouts “Save us!” They aren’t shouting “Save us from our sins!” They’re shouting “Free us from our oppressor!”

And so that coat-less crowd around Jesus, they are claiming that the time is now. Finally, the kingdom of David has arrived! Finally Israel will be back on top. The Messiah's here. He's arrived to free us, just like we've been hoping.

And Jesus marches up through the town, making a scene, really: people are all around him. Some of them aren't wearing all their clothes, palm trees are being stripped bare, trampled up by everyone as Jesus moves on--and this whole slow-moving processions--because a pair of donkeys isn't speedy--makes its way up to the Temple. People lean out their windows, "Who is this?" "It's Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." Jaded people are tweeting about how long it'll take for Rome to take him out. Hopeful people are running out to join him, taking an extra coat.

### ***Jesus at the Temple***

And Jesus continues on right up to the Temple, where of course he'd go, because that's where Psalm 118 says he'll go. He eventually ends up at the Temple itself. We read "The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them."

This makes sense to us; it feels Jesus-y, right? Who's unimportant? Whose in need? Oh, that's where he is doing his thing. No word on what the crowd felt when he didn't immediately kick out Rome. But before he gets up close to the Temple, where he's doing all that healing, he reaches the Temple Courts.

This happened, there:

***12 Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. “It is written,” he said to them, “‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”***

People love, love, love to quote this passage to me. You all know that I’m pretty convinced that if you follow Jesus you really can’t kill people, no matter who says you should, because he says we can’t. I’m pretty convinced that when he says to “love our enemies,” he means don’t bomb them or sue them or actively hurt them. I’m convinced that using physical force against someone is non-Christian, is something we’re not allowed to do. You all know this, I don’t hide it. Whatever.

But surprisingly often people will lift up this passage as proof that Jesus was okay with violence. He sure does seem to be acting violently! He must be okay with violence, despite everything he said and did.

See, you can do two things with this passage. You can put it over or under everything else. Either it upends everything else, renders what Jesus tells us and models for us elsewhere null. Or it submits to everything else, and the way we make sense of it is by understanding it in light of what else we

know. If we believe that Jesus is consistent, and not capricious--that he has integrity--then we have to make sense of this somehow. To just say he was on board with violence now and then is to say that God is never understandable, never relatable, and we'll never know how to approach Him, because who knows, maybe this time we'll be eaten.

I think it's wrong to put this passage on top of everything else. It doesn't trump every single other virtue Jesus called us to and modeled for himself. So if he isn't acting with capricious violence, what's he doing? We're clued in in two ways.

### ***Clued-In: Place***

First is the place. Jesus is in what was called "The Court of Gentiles." It was as close as God-fearing Gentiles, non-Jews, could get to the Temple. So notice: The place where Gentiles could get has been co-opted by, oh, economic forces. We could say greed, if we want to be moral about it.

Jewish People were coming from all over, and even from nearby, and they had Roman coin, they had non-coin precious metals, you know: they needed the right money to give to the Temple, they needed to purchase the doves and other sacrifices that were made because they didn't bring them along when they traveled.

And so the Court of the Gentiles was the place where this was happening. It's been taken over by cash. The Chief Priests could have punted this money-changing thing, this sacrifice market, out of the Temple Courts entirely if they'd wanted to. But they just don't care that God-fearing Gentiles don't have any place to come to anymore. They just don't care.

### ***Clued-In: Quotes***

We're also given clues as to what Jesus is doing by what he quotes at the people who he is chasing off. He says *“My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”*

The first “My house will be called” thing is from Isaiah 56, which is an awesome bit of Bible. It's all about God will bring into His people, the Israelites, all those other outsiders, those people who the Israelites thought would never be able to be in relationship with God. God promises, there, that these non-Israelites will come to the Temple and have access to God like they've never had before. The passage begins by talking about how God's salvation is close at hand-- something Jesus has been preaching since he first got rolling.

But about mid-way through it reads:

***And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD***



***to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant--these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." The Sovereign LORD declares—he who gathers the exiles of Israel: "I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered."***

This is an awesome promise, right, that God is a God of all exiles, all refugees, and will bring into His people those who weren't His people, and that the benefits of the Temple--forgiveness, and worship of God--will be theirs. This is Jesus' framework for the Temple. This is what he knows it could be. But he looks at the Temple as it is, and sees that the one sliver of place for the Gentiles has been co-opted by the Temple System itself.

And to follow that up by talking about how "his house" has become a "den of robbers" doubles down on this, but in an especially condemning way toward the Chief Priests. It's a quote from Jeremiah 7, and it's not a passage you quote when you're at the Temple, you know, unless you want to suggest the Chief Priests have failed somehow, and the Temple is going down. Jesus is cool with that, apparently.

### ***Clued In: The Point***

If we take these clues, we see that Jesus isn't, here, saying "Oh, by the way, in certain circumstances be as violent as you want." He's not modeling for us a "most of the time do as I say and do...but not *all* of the time" ethic.

What he's doing is condemning the way the Gentile Court has been privatized, the closest the non-Jewish people can get to God's has been given over to a market out to make cash off the need of those who seek to be close to God. Jesus is calling out the way the Temple System is broken, he's condemning its negligence to those who have rights there, and he's pointing out that the "peace for the nations" hope of Zechariah 9's king is actively being antagonized by the system the Temple's Chief Priests allow.

Jesus' behavior, if it was anything we're not used to, was economic disruption. It condemned, interrupted, and revealed the way the Temple was failing, excluding people it was meant to embrace. If we don't understand Jesus' behavior in this context, then we don't understand it at all, and it is just something to toss at people who want to obey him when he says "bless your enemies".

He didn't act with violence toward people, harming them; he acted in a way those in power couldn't ignore, against a system that excluded people God meant to embrace.

### ***Understanding:***

Jesus goes on, of course, from these outer Gentile courts to the Jewish-only ones, and heals those the religious elite thought were cursed by God.

Children keep on shouting Hosanna, and the Chief Priests and Torah-Teachers get on Jesus' case about it. They know what we forget; that for them to say this to Jesus, and for him not to shut them up, implies that he agrees with them. He is "the Son of David," the Messiah, the one Psalm 118

hopes in.

I wonder, though, if the fact that they don't say a word to him about the total disruption he made out in the Gentile Court is some sort of admission of guilt. Or maybe they're just going the way of the typical Pharisee: So concerned to police their theology they don't have time for anything else.

But Jesus responds to their critiques, quoting another Psalm, Psalm 8, and "fulfilling" it in that moment:

***“From the lips of children and infants  
you, Lord, have called forth your praise”***

This is throwing down a gauntlet. Jesus is saying the kids are all right; or, at least, all the kids are right. He is the Lord. He is the Son of David. He is the one who can answer the cry of Hosanna. And even if he's not doing it the way anyone around him is expecting, their criticism and judgment doesn't matter. His, though, does. And the Temple, its Chief Priests, its Torah Teachers, they've failed. What he did out in the court of the Gentiles is his judgment on what they've been up to.

### ***Noticing:***

Here's what I want us to notice today. I want us to notice how the Bible is used in this passage, and I want us to think about how we're using Scripture.

I hope some of us are using it, you know? I mean, Paul says "[All] scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, so that the person who belongs to God can be

equipped to do everything that is good.” And if you didn’t notice I just used the Bible to talk about how we ought to use the Bible, let me point that out. But you don’t get a Christian without the New Testament, and you don’t get the New Testament without the Old.

***Using Scripture: Claiming, Enacting:***

We see how Scripture is used, here, don’t we? First there’s Jesus, who enacts it. He knows who he is and what he is meant to do with himself. He recognizes his special role in history, and recognizes that he himself is meant to fulfill the prophecies about the Messiah, because he is the Messiah. He takes on Scripture, does the things the Messiah is meant to do, so that those who have “ears to hear” and “eyes to see” get it. And yet, there are all sorts of expectations about the Messiah that Jesus rejects. He chooses to be the Messiah on his own terms, and enacts Psalms and Prophecy that point not to his power and rights, but to his humility and responsibility. That tells us a lot of things, but it also tells us that Jesus knew Scripture, and knew his place in it, knew how he wanted to make use of it, and had the courage and competency to do so.

Jesus doesn’t accidentally quote passages of Scripture that call the Temple “his” house, that refer to himself as “the Lord.” He does it on purpose. He is claiming and enacting Scripture, and the Messiah's place in it.

***Using Scripture: Connecting, Reminding:***

There’s Matthew, who makes clear for us what Jesus himself enacts. He’s paid close attention, and reminded us of all the stuff we don’t have in our heads, have memorized-- Zechariah, the Psalms, Jeremiah and Isaiah. Thank God for

his work.

***Using Scripture: Anticipating, Celebrating, Participating:***

There's the crowd. They see what Jesus is doing. They celebrate it. They participate in it. And they do this because they've anticipated it. They don't need Matthew to tell them that Jesus taking the donkeys is a Messianic move; they've been waiting. They jump in; lay down their coats, strip the palm trees, because they see the moment at hand, and want to be a part of it...even if they don't quite realize what being the Messiah means. They make an effort.

***Using Scripture: Forgetting, Neglecting:***

There's the currency exchangers, the sacrifice sellers. Let's be gracious to them, and say that they've forgotten Scripture, or, say, neglected it. There isn't any animosity here; they're just out to make coin, you know? And they found a place where they could put up a stand. They didn't mean to turn the Temple into a "bandits hideout," to destroy it's credibility as a "Prayer House," for the Gentiles particularly, but everyone else, too.

***Using Scripture: Ignoring:***

The Chief Priests and Torah Teachers, we assume haven't forgotten, but have instead, ignored Scripture. Just ignored it. They had power to evict those who Jesus evicted; by refusing to do so, by allowing the Gentile Court to be taken over, they'll be evicted from their role in power, condemned and judged accurately, the way they inaccurately condemn and Judge Jesus and those who shout "Hosanna!" at him.

***What We Need:***

None of them, except maybe Jesus, knew that they were creating Scripture, that they were playing out, in that moment, a moment that we ourselves would turn back to and take our own lessons from. They didn't know that they'd be remembered for what they did with the Bible: ignore it, neglect it, participate in it, even create it, as Matthew ended up doing when he connected, for his little congregation, what Jesus was doing to what God had said the Messiah would do.

There's no new Bible coming out; we aren't making Scripture. But we are making--building up or tearing down--its reputation, and the reputation of God who stands behind it. How we use the Bible, if we learn it, what we do with Scripture matters, because the world is watching to see if we'll act with sensitive integrity, or judgmental bluster and hypocrisy. We can't play fast and loose with this stuff, and we can't sit out the game. When it comes to engaging with Scripture, we have to do it well.

Some of us, honestly, simply need to do it at all. If we're trying to live a Christian life guided only by the Spirit in us and among each other, we'll be held back in every area that we can mature in. The Spirit works with Scripture to increase our virtue, our faithfulness, our love, our everything. I hope that we can lean into it.

***Reminding: Lean Into It:***

For those of us who are, consider taking on the role of Matthew among us, pointing out Scripture's relevance for the rest of us who can't quite connect our situation to any promise of God.

And I want to remind us of something scriptural this morning. It's on my heart, you know, and I probably have our attention for, like, 2 more minutes, so. I want us to remember to hope. I think there are enough of us who need reminded to hope that it's worth all of us hearing the reminder.

I want those of us who need hope to cling to the promise that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." That God has promised "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you." I pray that we might pray ourselves for a sense of peace that makes no sense given our circumstances, that surpasses all our understanding. I'd remind us that "trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope." And even though life is full of trouble, and I wish that we could all avoid it, the hope trouble produces is that God is with us, for us, not against us, and actively loves us. We are not abandoned, and whatever "light and momentary" troubles we face, Jesus Christ is Lord and we are not alone. So "be strong and take heart all you who hope in the Lord," and if it's the case that we need to put our hope back in the Lord, instead of some other place, let's do that, too. He has overcome the world, with all its difficulties, and will see us through whatever we need to overcome right now.

All that said, let's consider what we're doing with Scripture, because we've got to. And if it is hope we need, there's a lot of it there if we look for it.