

Sermon – April 2, 2023  
“Who is this?”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 21:1-11

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit come and visit, filling open hearts and anointing the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that continues our transformation into Christ's image and leads us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen*

Good morning! Welcome to Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. We have several additional services planned for this week as we seek to walk with Jesus on his Holy Week journey. Let me invite you to take advantage of those opportunities and to make time as you go through this week to spend a few moments or many reading one or more of the Gospel writers' accounts of the week and to spend time praying to God and to find ways to encourage or provoke each other to love. We will be gathering for prayer this afternoon at 4:00 pm at Fairfields to pray for God to continue to transform our hearts, our homes, our churches, and our community. Please come and join us if you are able. Continue to pray for wisdom and guidance as we move forward in the disaffiliation process. The next milestone is the Called Annual Conference on May 6<sup>th</sup> where the members of the Virginia Conference will vote on ratification of our agreement with the Conference to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church. I also invite you to pray for New Town Methodist Church in Williamsburg as last week they walked away from their church building and church facility and began to worship in a new place.

We have our palms to wave this morning to help us recall that there was once a great celebration as Jesus came into Jerusalem. The ashes we received at the start of Lent have given away to green palms that are to help us recall this day when Jesus rode a donkey, escorted by crowds of disciples and people, over the crest of the Mount of Olives, down the road, and into Jerusalem. Let's look together at this moment in Jesus' ministry.

Jesus has been to Passover many times in his life. Several of those trips are recorded in the Gospels and, as Jesus was a devout Jew, we assume that he has come with the crowds every year of his life for the three required festivals that mark the worship of God by the Jews. The greatest of those festivals is Passover, the time when the Jews remember that it was by God's mighty hand that their ancestors were freed from cruel slavery in Egypt. We should also recall that on Jesus' last trip into the city, the Jews had taken up stones to kill him, and now that he has raised Lazarus from the dead, the Jews have decided that Jesus must die. For Jesus to come to Jerusalem openly would be to risk his life.

We might expect Jesus to try to blend in with the crowd and keep a low profile, to quietly celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem, and then to leave with the crowds to avoid notice by those seeking his life. Jerusalem will triple in size during Passover so for Jesus to hide among those who come to worship would not be difficult, and that seems to be what Jesus is doing as he and his disciples have journeyed up the backside of the Mount of Olives from Bethany and are almost at the point where they will top the mount and see Jerusalem. They have been walking among the many others who have come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. But Jesus stops short of the crest and sends two of his disciples to get a donkey and her foal from the small village just ahead. Jesus' request for a donkey to ride would raise questions in his disciples' minds as all pilgrims going to the Passover festival were to walk the last two miles into the city. Yet, his disciples obey, go, and bring the donkeys. His disciples also remove their cloaks and cover the beasts to keep Jesus from getting dirt from the animals on his clothes. It is an interesting sacrifice that his followers make for him as they provide a mount for Jesus to ride with their cloaks as a cover for the animals, taking off their outer garments for Jesus.

Many of those with Jesus and around him in the crowds would have understood the significance of his request to ride a donkey into the city. They would know that a king coming on a donkey is seen as one who comes in peace. Many would know that King David, when he returned from his exile from Jerusalem, rode a donkey down this same road into the city as a returning victorious king who returned home in peace. Others in the crowd would also know of the promise

found in Zechariah 9:9 about the Messiah coming into the city riding on a donkey and her foal. Those who are with Jesus would catch that by his riding the donkeys into the city, Jesus is openly declaring that he is a king. He is making a statement that he is the Messiah who is to come. In the Gospels, this is the only time Jesus is said to have ridden an animal. He and his disciples have just walked 100 plus miles from Caesarea and have just climbed up the 15-mile-long steep grade road from Jericho that leads to the top of Mount of Olives. Jesus does not need to ride into the city because of a physical need; he chooses to ride into the city for another reason. Jesus is very purposeful in sending for the donkeys and making the point that a king is coming into Jerusalem.

Jesus rides forward on the donkey and her foal. As they top the hill and begin their descent into the city, the crowds with Jesus began to repeat words from Psalm 118, words written to herald the coming of a king: “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”<sup>i</sup> Those along the road and in the large crowd are drawn to this procession. They pick up the cheers of those with Jesus. They begin to welcome the rider on the donkeys into the city. Many take off their cloaks and lay them on the ground before Jesus. The placing of one’s cloaks is a way of welcoming and proclaiming a new king. In the Old Testament when Jehu is anointed king over Israel, his commanders remove their cloaks and pay homage to him as their new king by placing the cloaks on the ground before him for him to walk on. So those in the crowd before Jesus seem to be recognizing him as a king. Many also go and cut palm branches from the trees and bushes that line the road down the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem. Palm branches represent the nation of Israel and are a sign that those in the crowd see this new king as one they hope will release their nation from bondage to the Romans and bring forth the nation of Israel into the prominence it once had.

The Romans soldiers in the city would also have seen this commotion at the top of the Mount of Olives and would have heard the cries of the crowd. They would have needed to ask what is happening, but even if someone told them the meaning of the rider on the donkeys and what the crowds’ actions and cheers meant, they would not have feared much the coming of a king not riding in a chariot of war but riding on a donkey. They would also not have been bothered much by a king who is not surrounded by troops carrying weapons of war but one for whom the crowds praise, remove their cloaks, and wave palm branches. Rome would be on alert for any king who claims to replace their emperor, but a king that rides a donkey instead of a great warhorse would not get much attention. They would have seen no need for alert, just watchfulness of what might be developing.

Later, when the Roman soldiers mock Jesus, we will hear them call him “The King of the Jews.” They are not afraid of such a weak king.

Matthew clearly wants us to see Jesus as fulfilling the prophecy found in Zechariah, that a king has come to Jerusalem, a humble king riding on a donkey, a king who does not come in victory from some great battle and is not coming to conquer those who are ruling in Israel. Jesus is a king who comes in peace yet in triumph, a triumph that will be received through death on a cross and not won at the point of a spear. Jesus is a king who comes to establish a kingdom of peace and not a kingdom whose citizens are coerced into compliance. Jesus comes to be a new king who reigns first in the hearts of the citizens of his kingdom. Jesus comes riding into Jerusalem making an open, bold claim that he is the Messiah foretold of in scripture, not one who will with might overthrow the rule of Rome or even the rulers of the temple, but one who will surrender his life so that all who believe in him will be released from the bondage of sin and death.<sup>ii</sup> Jesus comes as a humble king who will freely give his life in exchange for the citizens of his kingdom.<sup>iii</sup>

Even with the cry of the crowds around Jesus and the excitement of those who are seeking to welcome this peaceful, humble king ringing loudly in the praise from the crowds, we begin to hear rumbles of other cries that will grow as Jesus journeys through this week of his earthly life. These cries begin with those who ask, “Who is this?” They do not know Jesus. They are wondering who this man might be who claims to be a king, who would dare to ride on donkeys down from the top of the Mount of Olives, who would seek to play out the scripture’s description of a coming Messiah at this great festival. We also should catch in the answer to their question another tension that emerges with Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem. The response we find being given is that the rider is “the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”<sup>iv</sup> The description of Jesus as a prophet from the north in reply to the question of “Who is this?” carries with it the idea that Jesus is from the northern province. He and this crowd who proclaim his arrival are Galileans, those from another place, those who are stirring up trouble. We catch the beginning of resistance to the arrival of this humble king to be ruler in any form over all people, resistance that will grow throughout the week until the cry of the crowds becomes “Crucify him, crucify him!”

Each year as we journey through the Christian calendar, we come to Palm Sunday. And when we do, we seek to remind ourselves of who Jesus is. We wave palms to help us recall. We sing hymns that echo the cries of the followers of Jesus. We recall events from our own lives that helped us as we encounter this man riding a donkey and begin to learn for ourselves who Jesus is. Palm Sunday marks the beginning of a week when we will look at the life of Jesus as he answers

the question of “Who is this?” completely. It is a week when each of us should find our Bibles and read one or more of the accounts of this week that is found in all of the Gospels. It is a week of extra services that, if we attend them, will help us to develop our own answer to the crowds’ question of “Who is this?”

If we follow Jesus’s journey through this week, we will begin to discover with his disciples who he is. Let me highlight the progression of the week from Matthew’s Gospel. On Monday Jesus will drive out those who are doing business in the temple. He will give a clear message to the leaders of the temple that he is present, and they will respond to protect their own interest. Jesus will also curse a fig tree as he walks to Jerusalem from Bethany on Monday and will work miracles in the temple and field the challenges of those who resent his presence and fear what his actions mean for their comfortable lives. On Tuesday we will find the reaction of his disciples to the dead fig tree, a tree that represents the fruit Israel has borne for God as a nation that, like the now dead fig tree, has ceased to produce fruit and never will again bear fruit. On this day Jesus will also debate with the religious leaders and silence them. He will teach in the temple and the crowds will listen. At the end of the day, Jesus will return to Bethany but will give a great discourse for his followers from the top of the Mount of Olives. On Wednesday Jesus will stay in Bethany and only Judas will travel to Jerusalem. He will do so to arrange for the betrayal of Jesus. On Thursday Jesus will send disciples to return to Jerusalem to prepare for the Passover meal, he will travel from Bethany to Jerusalem to eat the last supper with his disciples, and he will pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. We will gather at Bethany UMC in Reedville Thursday evening at 6 pm to worship, share in Communion, and enjoy a time of table fellowship. On Friday, Good Friday, Jesus will be betrayed and arrested, tried in front of Annas, Caiaphas, part of the Sanhedrin, all of the Sanhedrin, and the Romans including Pilate and Herod. And Jesus will be crucified, and will die, and his body will be placed in the tomb. We will gather at Afton UMC at 7:30 pm for a Tenebrae service on Good Friday, reading scripture and extinguishing lights as we read. Saturday there is nothing in the scriptures other than the disciples resting on the Sabbath as the Law required. We will gather on Saturday at the Fairfields UMC cemetery on Folly Road for a short time of remembering the saints of our churches and families who have gone to be with Jesus in the last year. And then on Sunday at 6:30 am, we will gather at Bessie Mae’s for a sunrise service and our celebration of the victory of Jesus the humble king. We will also have a time of table fellowship at Fairfields at 8:30 am with a continental breakfast and then will celebrate Easter at our regular services on Easter morning. Let

me encourage you to read the scriptures that describe these events each day as we go through the week. I will send them out via media each day.

Let me begin to give us an answer to the crowds' question that we may contemplate throughout this week. The crowd asks, "Who is this?" The answer in part is that this is Jesus the humble king who comes to Jerusalem not to establish a lasting rule over the Jews, but to bring peace between God and all humanity through the shedding of his blood and death on a cross. He is a humble king who will die so that we may live. Jesus is the one who will clear the temple not to bring back and reestablish the priestly order that God sought for the priesthood, but to offer the final sacrifice that opens up the Holy of Holies, the dwelling place of God, to all humanity. And finally, Jesus comes as the prophet of old said he would. He comes not to restore order and fulfill the Old Testament laws for worship, but to enable the citizens of a new kingdom, the Kingdom of God, through the empowerment he gives to his disciples, to be those who are kingdom people. People who are living as those who dwell with God now and for all eternity. Citizens who are God's witnesses during this age that all may see the glory of God. Who is this? The one who comes in the name of the Lord to set his people free from the bondage of sin and death and reconcile them to God for all eternity. This is Jesus, the one who saves.

*Pray with me: Jesus, open our hearts that we might grasp more deeply the steadfast love of God and that you are the one who takes away the sin of humanity and reconciles us to God. Open our hearts to catch a glimpse of you riding on donkeys and let us praise you with our own cry of "Hosannah! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosannah!" We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen*

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<sup>i</sup> NRSV Matthew 21:9

<sup>ii</sup> Wilkins, Michael J.. The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew (p. 689). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

<sup>iii</sup> France, R. T.. The Gospel of Matthew (The New International Commentary on the New Testament) (pp. 777-778). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.

<sup>iv</sup> NRSV Matthew 21:11