

Ben Lattimer
Stone Church of the Brethren
Sermon
April 2, 2023
On Matthew 21
Palm Sunday
Choose

Sermon

Fleabag Intro

Let me start with a disclaimer. I haven't seen the show and so I don't know if it's good or not. But during Bible Study this week, Mary shared about a conversation on the show *Fleabag*. A woman is talking to her friend, who happens to be a priest. And she says she doesn't believe in "all that". She thinks the universe is random and full of misery and then it's over...

Her friend, the priest looks at her and smiles and says - "But why would you believe something so awful? When you could *choose* to believe something so wonderful?!"

Back to the Story - Go Steal Me a Donkey

Story time at the Lattimer house are never dull. Over the years, we've broken out the Children's Bible and read a story a day for a season, in addition to whatever our regular bedtime story book happens to be. I remember one night when Cindy was reading this Bible Story to the boys - back when they were little - and took some creative liberties with the translation. As she read it, "Jesus turned to his disciples and said, 'Go steal me a donkey.'" ?

It's not far off! As the Gospel we read this morning tells it, Jesus has his disciples head into town. There, he says, they will find a donkey. Actually in the Gospel of Matthew that we read, it's 2 donkeys - a mother and her colt. "Untie them and bring them back to me... Oh and if anyone asks, just say, 'The Lord needs them.'"

Well, whether by divine foresight or prior arrangement - the disciples find things just as Jesus had said. And so begins this strange parade.

Two Parades

Jesus rides into town on these donkeys. The crowds gather, waving palms and shouting, "Hosanna!"

Actually history tells us there were two parades on this day, the Sunday before the Passover. While Jesus entered here on the East side of the city, by the Mount of Olives, over on the other side of Jerusalem there was an altogether different procession.

You see, as Jews from around the world came to the Holy City, gathering for the feast - the leaders of the Empire would get nervous. It was no secret that the Roman occupation wasn't particularly popular among the people. Crowds of zealous people gathered to celebrate their deliverance from another Empire - the Egyptians - all those centuries ago might make for a dangerous atmosphere.

So every year, on the week of the festival, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor would journey from his palace on the coast to Jerusalem - and parade into town with a show of force, a reminder - lest anyone get any ideas. Pilate riding in on his war horse, surrounded by his army - columns of soldiers bearing swords...

Perhaps Jesus' parade is a kind of creative non-violent protest - a parody of Pilate's parade. Here comes Jesus, riding on a donkey, surrounded by the crowds, bearing not swords but palm branches...

Riding on Two Donkeys?

Now, there's this strange detail in Matthew's gospel. It's actually different than the way the other 3 tell it. In Matthew, there are *two* donkeys - a mother and her colt - and it sounds like Jesus is riding on them both? What does that look like exactly?

—Let me just say that if you Google it, there are some great images out there of the possibilities. Jesus sitting on one sideways, with his feet reclining on the other while he rides. Or Jesus standing up, reins in hand, one foot on each donkey. Or my personal favorite - one donkey piggy back on the other, with Jesus on top... 🤔

Surely Matthew must have known this sounded ridiculous. In the other Gospels there's only one. So what's he doing here?

Matthew likes his Old Testament echoes - and he says that this moment is to

“fulfill what was spoken by the prophet:

“Proclaim to the daughter of Zion,
Behold, your king is coming to you,
humble and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

Now in Hebrew poetry - like from the Prophet Zechariah that Matthew is quoting - the lines don't rhyme. Instead they run in parallel, two ways of saying the same thing, like echoes... “Behold your king is coming to you - humble and mounted on a donkey... on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” In Zechariah, this is a reference back to King Solomon who famously rode into Jerusalem on a humble pack animal, an image that the prophet then casts as a vision of restoration, when the world's Empires will fall and the true King will ride in humbly ushering in a new kind of kingdom. “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.”

So why does Matthew take this parallel poetry literally - why the *two* donkeys?

Maybe it's because Matthew doesn't want us to miss it - he doesn't want us to

miss *him* - to miss Jesus. Jesus is the King - the true king... He's like: "Let me tell

you how much the king, Jesus is... He's so much the king - he rode into Jerusalem

on BOTH the donkey AND the colt. He's the '*double donkey king*.'"

Behold your king is coming to you... the *true* King... ushering in a new kind of

kingdom...

Choose - with rising close...

The choice then is up to us... Who do we choose to follow? Which parade will we

join...? The Empire with pomp and circumstance, promoting fear and promising

security through force is all around us. The myth of safety through power and

success defined as a competitive enterprise rather than a cooperative one. The

Empire is all around us - with its promise of luxury bought at the price of

ignorance - living in grand palaces ignoring the invisible masses around us on

whose backs they are built...

“Why would you believe - why would you *choose* something so awful? When you could choose to believe something so wonderful?”

Jesus rides into Jerusalem, without an army - without a palace... And yet as Rich Mullins writes, “the hope of the whole world rests on the shoulders of this homeless man...”

Which parade will we join? Do we ride with the Imperial banners, or do we stand with Jesus... Do we shout “Hosanna! God save us!” to this King?

He doesn't have an army... But he's got me... Because his vision is of a world I want to live in - a world I want to *believe* in...

Jesus is riding into a world born again - a world of new beginnings... A world flowing with living water - where we can bravely ask our questions together.

Jesus is riding into a world beyond judgment and blame - where we no longer begin by assuming the worst about each other, but instead recognize the reality that tragedies just happen sometimes, and work together to find healing... Jesus is riding into a world of *hope*... A world where death itself no longer has the final

say - where these bones that seem so dead can live again... Jesus is riding into a kingdom marked by love...

Jesus is ushering in the Kingdom of God - and they will kill him for it...

But he is inviting us to follow... What will we choose?

Amen.