**March 28, 2021 Matthew 21:12-17**

***Upside Down***

**Scripture:** Matthew 21:12-17 NRSV

*(12)Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. (13)He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers." (14)The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. (15)But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became angry (16)and said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself'?" (17)He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.*

**Notes:**

1. This triumphal entry was ***both*** the same as ***and*** different from those that had happened before.
   1. Jesus’s entry was a march toward ***death*** and ***resurrection***.
   2. Victory does come through ***humility***.
   3. Jesus rode in on a donkey as an illustration of ***humility***.
2. Jesus *is* the ***offering*** for the temple.
   1. Jesus overturns the tables of those selling ***doves***.
   2. ***Doves*** were the offerings of the poor.
   3. Jesus welcomes the ***vulnerable***.
   4. The ones still singing “Hosanna” are the ***children***,
3. When we are busy looking for God to fit our ***agenda***, we often miss out on God in our ***midst***.
   1. Jesus disrupted the way they were ***doing*** ***things***.
   2. The ***children*** recognized who he was.
   3. Are our ***politics*** aligned with Jesus?
   4. Do we put ***obstacles*** to ***worship*** in the way of people?
4. Jesus wants to ***disrupt*** our lives too.
   1. Jesus wants to bring a kingdom of ***love***, ***grace***, and ***truth***.
   2. Look for the ways that the kingdom of God is breaking in, and ***join*** ***that*** ***work***.
5. Christ came for so much more than what people ***thought*** they ***wanted***.
   1. What do you ***expect*** from the Lord and Savior?
   2. By ***committing*** to Christ, you are ***adopted*** into a family that is supportive, accepting, and loving.
   3. Jesus has come to ***free*** us from our bondage to sin, cycles of exclusion, and injustice.
   4. We are getting Christ the King, who has come to ***save*** ***us***.

**Script:**

This week I celebrated an anniversary of sorts. I remember walking into a classroom in Cumberland Maryland on March 24th, 1986. It was a Monday when I started, I would be a long-term substitute for what would be the last nine weeks of the school year. I remember the date so well because it was the week before Easter. Krista’s Birthday would be the following Friday, Good Friday. And I would be asked to work 3 days and off for what was referred to as Spring break.

So as I entered that classroom on that fateful day, I was thinking this was what I had worked for the past 4 ½ years, and I was excited to begin making some money in what I was trained for, and was thinking over and over, “What should I say as my first official statement as a teacher.” The bell rang, the students began entering the room and sitting down. I still remember the names of the students as I called out their names; Joe McGowan, Mike Hartman, Benny Buckbee, John Holt, just to name a few. And as I stood up to begin speaking, I blurted out some statement that really sounded stupid, a statement I would live with for at least 6 years, because these students would remind me of the statement for the next three years. And they would tell their younger friends and relatives to remind me of those words. Needless to say, my first day of being a teacher was not anything like I expected. In fact, it was a day that seemed as if I was in a state of shock all day long; like I was living in a dream, or maybe even a nightmare.

Things don’t always work out the way we expect, or imagine. I’m sure you have had days or situations that have been like that. Perhaps it is your first day on the job. Maybe it was your first date, your engagement or even your wedding day. Maybe it was a significant birthday, 16 and taking the drivers exam, 18 and graduating high school, 21 and being considered a legal adult, 62 and finally retiring and drawing social security. Yet these events just don’t seem to feel exactly as you expected.

Well today the people of Israel are experiencing such a day in their lives. The events of the day are not exactly what they expected. A day they had looked forward to for so long and it just didn’t seem to be what they imagined. We are talking about the triumphal entry of Jesus and the events that would take place immediately following, the clearing of the temple by Jesus. Turn with me in your bibles to Matthew 21:12-17, and join me in the reading of our Gospel passage for today.

(12)Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. (13)He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers." (14)The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. (15)But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became angry (16)and said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself'?" (17)He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there. ***Matthew 21:12-17 NRSV***

The echo of “Hosanna” still hung in the air. Coats and palm branches still covered the ground. The entrance into Jerusalem that morning looked so similar to any other victorious entrance by a grand military leader. It followed the same steps they had seen before. This was not their first triumphal entry, though Jerusalem may be a strange place for it. The military leader would enter the city victorious, amid shouts of praise, and go right through the center of the city to the temple.

But there were significant differences too, things that seemed odd for a triumphant military leader, especially if this was the Messiah on his way to overthrow the oppressive regime they had been living under for years. He rode a young donkey and didn’t enter with military chariots. The people with him weren’t soldiers but a group of misfit disciples. Then the oddest thing happened. After entering the city, he did what every other victorious leader did he went toward the temple. Normally the purpose of going to the temple was to make an offering to whichever god the victor worshiped, claiming even the place of worship for himself, but Jesus did something completely different. He went to the temple, but instead of placing an offering upon the altar, he began clearing it out.

While we don’t always center the Palm Sunday message around this clearing of the temple, it is very much a part of Jesus’s triumphal entry; illustrating once again the people expected the Messiah to look a very particular way. The way they expected him to look was like the military leaders of the world, but Jesus looked very different. He came to usher in a kingdom different than the one they thought they wanted, and clearing the temple was just one way Jesus illustrated, in profoundly strong ways, that something else was happening here. The kingdom of God had come, and was coming, and it didn’t look like they thought it would.

**This triumphal entry was both the same as and different from those that had happened before.** The Roman triumph was the highest honor granted to emperors and generals in the Roman Empire. It was a processional into the city of Rome, led by government officials, followed by the sacrificial animals (for the temples of the Roman gods), followed by the champion in a chariot, usually in embroidered purple regalia, followed by the spoils of war and the captives. This processional was given to those who were victorious in war, some saying to only those who had killed at least five thousand of their enemies. The processional included festivals, dancing, singing, and flower petals strewn upon the ground. The path for the processional was often cleaned and prepared by the government to usher in the triumphant victor of war.

Jesus’s processional wasn’t into Rome, the capital of the empire. Instead, Jesus came to Jerusalem the location of the Jewish temple and the religious heart of their faith. Jesus’s entry also wasn’t as a victor of war who had killed thousands. Rather, it was a march toward death. But Christ’s death and resurrection were an act of victory in a different way. With his version of the triumphal entry, Jesus seems to be illustrating in yet another example of the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God that victory does not come through violence but that victory comes through humility.

This triumphal entry took place at the beginning of a festival; Passover seeming to mirror some of the components of a Roman triumphal entry. But the festival of Passover is not about war but about remembering the way God spared the lives of the Jews and the miraculous ways God cared for them, freeing them from the oppressive Egyptian rule. This festival would be in stark contrast to those of the Romans bringing offerings for gods like Jupiter. Jesus instead seems to be highlighting the remembrance of the exodus and pointing to a new exodus of freedom, bringing an offering toward the temple only this offering was himself.

There also seems to be a parallel with Passover in that, while the Jews celebrate the salvation of their firstborn sons, ultimately their salvation is arriving through the sacrifice of God’s only Son. Instead of a horse and chariot, Jesus rode in on a donkey as an illustration of humility. Donkeys were common in the area, not a display of wealth. Donkeys were pack animals, not war animals, making them a symbol of peace instead of a symbol of war.

**Jesus *is* the offering for the temple.** Jesus’s journey to the temple was expected because it was normal of a typical triumphal entry. They would expect him to make an offering to God in the temple as a statement of victory. They would have expected him to offer a prayer of thanksgiving and perhaps prayers for success in the coming days. Instead of making an offering upon the altar, he turned their world upside down. Jesus overturns the tables and benches of those selling doves. It’s important that Matthew mentions doves as the item being sold. Leviticus 5:7 says, “Anyone who cannot afford a lamb is to bring two doves or two young pigeons to the Lord as a penalty for their sin—one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering.” Doves were the offerings of the poor.

Stating that the temple had been turned into a den of robbers, with the context of them selling doves, implies that this was an act of injustice. “Den of robbers” is from Jeremiah 7:11, in which the surrounding context discusses idolatry, adultery, and perjury. People were committing these sins and then coming to offer sacrifices, declaring that their offering made it so their sins didn’t matter. Yahweh declares that their acts of injustice and sin have been seen. Yahweh declares that God did not just command the people to burn offerings but also to act in obedience to God.

This is also a passage where God declares clearly that he is angry because of the people’s disobedience and injustice. The poor were being taken advantage of. People were finding ways to make money off the acts of worship of the poor, worshipful acts of the most vulnerable. The reference to Jeremiah shows that Jesus is angry at the ways others are being taken advantage of. Jesus’s anger is shown clearly in his overturning of the tables. The temple, and making sacrifices there, was no longer about prayer and obedience but about profit, gain, and perpetuating injustice.

Jesus doesn’t make a sacrifice after overturning the tables either. Instead, he welcomes the vulnerable. The blind and lame find healing from Jesus. He welcomes them into the temple, unlike the money changers, who blocked their entrance. Jesus is doing work in the temple. His offering is not found in a burnt sacrifice but in the love and healing he extends toward those in need. The ones still singing “Hosanna” are the children, another vulnerable group that is welcomed into the presence of Jesus. Mark 10 tells of Jesus rebuking the disciples for keeping the children from him. Jesus declares that the kingdom of heaven belongs to little children. The children are the ones in the temple courts who recognize who Jesus is. The religious rulers and teachers don’t like what the children are declaring, yet the rulers and teachers are the ones who allowed the money changers to operate in the temple. They were focused on the wrong things, and missed the miracle of the coming of the kingdom of God in their midst. The children were the ones who recognized the kingdom of God being ushered in by Jesus.

**When we are busy looking for God to fit our agenda, we often miss out on God in our midst.** The Jews were busy looking for the Messiah to come in the ways they wanted. They expected a political ruler who would rise up and overthrow the Roman government. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the donkey, many of them thought this was the moment when he would declare his authority and lead a rebellion, taking over in the ways they wanted and imagined.

Instead of doing what they expected, however, he came and disrupted the way they were doing things. He called out their acts of injustice the ways they were abusing and using the poor and the ways they denied worship to vulnerable people. He revealed God’s anger at the sins of injustice, idolatry, and hypocrisy. He healed people, people who were considered unclean, and outsiders, welcoming the lame, the blind, and the poor people who would normally be viewed as unclean welcoming them into the temple. The children recognized who he was and what he was doing, and instead of dismissing them, he welcomed them. He rebuked not the children but the religious leaders who continued to miss the point.

We too often look for Christ to come in a particular way, to support a particular agenda. This can look like politics: Are our politics aligned with Jesus, or are we trying to align Jesus with our politics? This can look like exclusion: Do we put obstacles to worship in the way of people particularly vulnerable people and expect Christ to be on our side? This can look like silencing the voices of those we look down on, much like the religious rulers wanted to silence the voices of the children.

Jesus wants to disrupt our lives too. To overturn the places of injustice, to clean out the lies and idolatry. Letting him would make space for healing for ourselves and for others. It would help us to be formed into the image of Christ instead of forming Christ in the image we want. It would help align our vision so we can see the kingdom of God already at work in the world, and join that work.

Jesus wanted to do so much more than just free the people from an oppressive regime. He wanted to usher in a kingdom of everlasting justice. He wanted to elevate the lowly and humble the elevated to create a kingdom of equality. He wanted to bring about true and everlasting peace. He wanted to usher in a kingdom of love, grace, truth, and beauty. Jesus ushered the kingdom of God into the world. It’s still at work, and it’s still coming. We can cry out “Hosanna!” today while also repenting of the ways we have fallen short. We can cry out “Hosanna!” and look for the ways that the kingdom of God is breaking in, and join that work. The coming of the Messiah looked different than what they were expecting, and aren’t we glad? Because Christ came for so much more than what the people thought they wanted. And he’s come to do so much more than what we expect too.

What do you expect from the Lord and Savior? DO you expect to receive something physical, something solid? Do you expect some miraculous change in your life? If you have been walking with the Lord for some time, this walk can be challenging. We have faced difficulties, yet when we become fully reliant on Jesus, we learn that each day holds new mercies, the grace that Jesus supplies is endless, and if we are committed, we will see Jesus when life on this earth is over.

For those who have not given their life to the Lord, I promise that in the end committing your life to serve Jesus will be worth it. In times of difficulty you may doubt, but when that time is over, you will look back and see how the Lord has supplied your needs. By committing to Christ you are adopted into a family that is world wide looks different in each place that you go, but is always supportive, accepting, and loving.

Jesus has come to free us from our bondage to sin, cycles of exclusion, and injustice. He has come to give us eyes to see the ways that the kingdom of God is already at work in the world. He has come to partner with the Holy Spirit to see justice, peace, love, grace, truth, and beauty in the world around us even now, as we wait and long for its fullness to come. We aren’t getting a military leader. We are getting so much more. We are getting Christ the King. The Messiah. The One who has come to save us.