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Surprise!

(Matthew 21:1-11) "When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 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. 3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." 4 This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 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." 6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; 7 they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 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!" 10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" 11 The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

One of the mistakes that you and I make in reading our Bibles on occasion is to read them too solemnly – because when we do, we can sometimes miss the wonderful wit and irony and surprises that the writer has put before us. Consider our scripture for today. It is, of course, the traditional scripture for Palm Sunday, and we have already recalled that glorious parade of Jesus and the disciples and the townspeople of Jerusalem with our own procession and our own songs of praise. But it's a story that is actually full of surprises. And it begins in a way that is just plain funny – and it ends by surprising us with the good news of the gospel in ways that we hadn't expected.

To see the humor, update the beginning of this story to modern terms: First of all, notice the command to the disciples – *"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. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.'" But what if we updated the story to modern times and modern terms like this: What would your response be if you looked out your window one morning to find two or three scraggly looking characters trying to hotwire your car? And when you rush out and say "*What in the world are you doing?*" and they respond "*Our master has need of it,*" are you likely to say "*Oh. OK. I didn't realize that; here are the keys?*" I don't think so. This is not the sort of surprise that you are likely to enjoy. But that is what Matthew is describing happened.

Whenever scripture uses surprising images and stories, it's a way of trying to get our attention and break through in order to teach us something. What is it, then, that this story – with its surprising and even incredible opening – is trying to tell us?

Well, for most of scripture a good principle for seeking to understand its meaning is to acknowledge that any Bible text usually tells us both something about God and something about ourselves. Or, to use a metaphor I like, every scripture can be both a lens and a mirror. We use a lens to see that which is, on first view, perhaps difficult to see clearly and we use a mirror to be able to see things that sometimes we can see in no other way. So what does this story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem tell us? In what way is the story a lens allowing us to see God more clearly and also a mirror that allows us to see the truth about ourselves more clearly?

When we turn our lens on the story, we see, I believe, two things about God: First, of all the scriptures that Matthew could have quoted on this occasion he chooses what might seem to be a rather obscure passage from the prophet Zechariah in order to

talk about Jesus; did you hear it? *“Here is your King, coming to you in humility.”* Or, as some translations have it, *“Here is your King, coming to you in gentleness.”* That’s what Matthew quotes in order to explain who Jesus is. But listen to what the passage in Zechariah goes on to say, which Matthew did not quote but which his readers and hearers would have known: *“[And the King] shall banish the chariots... and the war horses... and the warrior’s bow will be banished and He will speak peaceably to every nation”* (Zech 9:10). So, the first thing – and perhaps a surprising thing to those in the crowd who wanted Jesus to be a conquering general – is that Jesus comes representing a God of gentleness and justice and peace. Moreover, this is a God who is universal – not a god of a particular class or people or nation or race but a God of all. A God who cares for all and wants justice for all. Not just your God or my God but a God of everyone – even of those whom we may not much like and who we may even wonder why they’re getting the same deal as we are!

And that’s where this story also becomes a mirror, turned back on us, telling us something about ourselves. For the same crowd that ecstatically and joyously welcomed Jesus on that first Palm Sunday, the same ones that lined that road with palm branches to honor him with such delight and abandon are also the same ones who five days later were demanding His death, who loudly claimed to prefer releasing a career thief and a pickpocket – Barabas – to setting free Jesus from that Roman jail, who would soon line the very same road jeering while Jesus carried the cross on which he was to die. Why the astounding and swift change in their attitude? Well, as you read the story of Jesus’ last week of earthly life you see that the people had profoundly

misunderstood him and – just like you or I, sometimes, when faced with our own misunderstandings – lashed back with defensiveness and anger. For when you read the accounts of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and you read of the behavior of that crowd, you realize that what you are seeing are folks who were greeting a conquering hero. The people lining that road shouting "*Hosanna*" thought that finally, finally the Messiah was coming to put everything aright. Finally, God had come to bring a mighty army to wrest the land back from the Romans and to defeat them in battle. Finally, God had sent Jesus, a new David, to be the new King, the new warrior who would rout the hated Romans.

Yet they got surprised, and with that surprise came the anger that so quickly, five days later, turned on Jesus. Because it turned out that his new Savior, this new King, met none of the job description of King that they had assumed. This was a new kind of King with a new kind of Kingdom. A King that represented a God of gentleness and justice for all, a God of infinitely patient and loving persuasion, not of force of arms. For Jesus sits absolutely silently on that donkey in that process, surrounded by those who thought this was the battle march of the new David. But the King was not that sort of King; he was a savior that they did not expect. And so they got surprised. This was not at all what so many of them had expected, this was not the way that God was "supposed" to deal with them.

And thus the mirror that is this story has something to show us to. Because this is perhaps the hardest lesson that Jesus has to teach us: That God loves everyone. God loves even those folks whom we may find difficult to love. God loves even those folks whom we do not want to love. God loves those folks who don't love me and never

will. There are times, indeed, that I find this teaching terribly, terribly hard. It seems, even, terribly, terribly wrong. How could God possibly love some folks who do such horrifically evil things? Part of the answer is that we always have to distinguish between what pleases God and what God loves. I have no doubt that God is horrified and that God's heart breaks and that God is angry with those ones who would commit terrible acts against their fellow humans – especially when they do it in His name. To say that God is a God who loves everyone is not to say that God is not also a God of justice. Which means that God – as so much of the scripture indeed records – does indeed manifest anger against those who would deny that love. I think that it is even safe to say that even God may find it hard to like some of those folks whom He nonetheless loves!

But the story of Palm Sunday and the story of Holy Week teaches us that it is not about who we like, who we care for – or even about who God likes and enjoys. It is the story of the possibility of love that is for everyone, that transcends what is “supposed” to be, that will win out in the end, and which cannot be defeated even by death on a cross. It is the story of the possibility of bringing good out of evil instead of responding to evil with more hate.

Let me tell you a story. One evening, when Barbara and I lived in Hawaii, I was privileged to hear an extraordinary man speak, a gentleman by the name of Max Goldberger. And although he died about a year ago, I will never forget that evening with him. He was a physicist and consultant for the Department of Energy who had retired to Hawaii. He was eighty-two years old when I heard him, and he had had a fascinating life and had worked with folks ranging from Werner von Braun to Stephen

Spielberg. He was also a Jew. And out of the 14 members of his family, only he and two others survived the Holocaust. In 1941 he was sent to a Nazi labor camp. And while death at the labor camps under the Nazis wasn't as quick as in the concentration camps, it was usually just as sure in the end. And it likely would have been for Max too – except for one German Army officer in charge. That officer picked Max out because Max could speak several languages. He gave him “softer” jobs – although “soft” was hardly the way to describe it. And while Max was grateful, of course, that through this act of chance or fate or whatever it was that he survived what so many in his family and so many millions did not, it should never be forgotten that this same officer did indeed hold life and death power over people and could and did have folks executed on a whim or for possessing something as simple, as Max recalled, as a radio, folks that had become friends of Max's, folks whose lives were snuffed out on the whim of this officer, leaving widows and orphans most of whom also soon met the same fate.

Many years later Max told the story of standing at that officer's grave, having attended his funeral. Max, the Jew, standing at the grave of one who had held life and death power over him and who had represented a regime that had hatefully murdered six million of his friends and neighbors and fellow Jews, and almost a dozen of his own family. And what did Max do? He stood there – and recited the 23rd Psalm. He offered for that officer what the Jewish people call Kadish, the final blessing for him and

commending him to God.¹ Isn't that extraordinary? Isn't that surprising? I don't know what I would have done in that situation. I hope against hope no one ever again will have to face such a situation. But what Max offered there is exactly what God through Jesus Christ offered in that week so long ago – a surprise. It is the surprising grace of One who would not succumb to the temptation of force and coercion but would patiently, gently, caringly, compassionately and powerfully insist and keep on insisting that love is stronger than death and that love can make all things new.

Jesus asks us to believe that, knowing that it is hard sometimes, but also knowing that God walks with us whether it is on the road to Jerusalem or through the valley of the shadow of death. It is the good news indeed upon which the Church is founded and rooted, however imperfectly we may live it out sometimes. It is the good news that God can be trusted. It is the good news that indeed prompts us to shout "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."

For such a marvelous and welcome surprise, let us say: thanks be to God!

¹Also see Tammy L. McClure, My Enemy My Friend : Kadish for a Wehrmacht Officer (iUniverse, Inc., 2005)