
“Shaking the Foundations”

Matthew 21:1-11

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 13, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

Matthew must think we're hard of hearing. This is the twelfth time he tells us basically the same thing. "This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet..." and it won't be the last time he says it. He'll say it again two more times. Like a broken record or a child who keeps asking "are we there yet?" Matthew makes a point that he doesn't want us to forget—that the events surrounding Jesus are the fulfillment of earlier prophecy thus the will of God. He tells a particular story about Jesus in a particular way. Like with any story, it's not always what's included that's important, but what's excluded. Not always what is present but what is missing. Even in a university education, what and whose story is told and what other stories are never heard? Many history books still talk relentlessly about Christopher Columbus finding America. That is one particular narrative. But what we must remember are those who were here before he arrived. Sometimes, it's what or who is absent in the story that matters. What or who is missing may be the heart of a mission—the one lost sheep or lost coin or lost son, that one part of the story.

What's missing is sometimes the real treasure to be found. When Matthew quotes Zechariah 9, "Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey," he omits the phrase "triumphant and victorious is he." Matthew tells a particular kind of story. Not a triumphal entry, as we tend to call it, but a humble and meek one with a different kind of king. A king who just told the sons of Zebedee "whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant... just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." Your greatness will be measured by the extent of your service. Matthew leaves out talk of victory to stress humility.

And then as John Wesley said, "to confuse all worldly pomp and grandeur," not only is there no mention of triumph or victory, there are no horses, the customary war animal. "King Jesus rides the milk white horse," from that spiritual, is an image from Revelation and it suggests ultimate victory and conquest through war. But here King Jesus rides a humble donkey, not what we expect of a king. Jesus shows us that a donkey can be a really good thing as long as you don't act like one. This is not a military procession but a parade for another purpose. There's no violence and bloodshed like in Zechariah's oracle.

But there is peace achieved through a different means. Though it may look like a typical military procession of the day for a triumphant national hero—the spreading of branches and cloaks before Jesus as a symbol of honor, the shouts of acclamation, Jesus riding through the adoring crowds—this is anything but typical. There are no weapons or chariots or soldiers or AK47s or stealth bombers or drones or military build ups on the border of another country. There is just an unarmed Messiah on a donkey, knocking at the door of Jerusalem. Jesus comes to play the knock knock game. Knock, knock. Who's there? Jesus. Jesus, who? You sound just like the people of Jerusalem who ask, "Who is this?"

Jesus comes from the Mount of Olives, where the Messiah was expected to appear but he surely doesn't look or act like one. A donkey? The Democratic donkey image first came into usage when Democrat Andrew Jackson was running for president in 1828 and his opponents referred to him in not so Christian terms. Jesus rides a donkey to subvert the imperial logic of the *Pax Romana*, "Roman peace." The *Pax Romana* was the period of relative peace in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD for the Roman Empire. It last around 200 years or so and was considered the glory days for Rome as it hit its peak in prosperity. But they maintained peace by military control.

Jesus' symbolic, yet distinct, entry is an implicit critique of the Roman Empire. He turns notions of power and authority on their head. He reveals that you don't have to lead, pastor, or rule by tyrannical domination and intimidation. Pastors, you don't have to pick up a love offering for yourself every week! You can lead by nonviolent love and from a place of vulnerability. A simple, humble, nonviolent, peaceful, procession may be the most intimidating practice. In her book, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, Rebecca Solnit reminds us about the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina. These mothers came together as a group when their children began to disappear by the agency of the military junta that seized power in 1976. The abductions happened quietly and in secret "beneath a veneer of normalcy." These moms with little education and political experience began to gather at the Plaza de Mayo in the center of Buenos Aires, the same place where Argentinean independence was declared in 1810. Fourteen mothers gathered for the first time on April 30, 1977. They could not sit there because that was viewed as holding an illegal meeting in that spot so they ingeniously began to walk around the obelisk in the center of the plaza. They walked every Friday as a form of protest.

As their numbers increased each Friday, the police began to notice. Groups of policemen would arrive, take their names, and force them to leave. These mothers were attacked by dogs and clubs, arrested, and interrogated. But the mothers kept returning to the plaza. They affirmed that proverb, "If mama ain't happen, ain't nobody gonna be happy." They marched with photographs of their children on posters or hung around their neck. Some wore white kerchiefs embroidered with the names of their disappeared children and the dates of their disappearances. You see it's not always about who's present but who's absent and whose story is not being told. These women would not allow loveless amnesia to set in as they walked in remembrance of their loved ones. They processed the national trauma in public as a practice of social critique of the regime. By 1980 they had a whole network of mothers around the country, and in 1981 they began the first of their annual 24-hour marches to celebrate Human Rights Day; tons of journalists were present from across the world. Eventually, the military junta fell in 1983, and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were honored guests at the inauguration of the newly elected president.

Walking, marching, or processing is a form of theopolitical activism that can be the most daring act in the face of frightening domination because it brings that which is silent to voice and makes the hidden revealed in public. It makes what has been missing, ignored or forgotten, a part of the story. It reveals that there is another way to live, lead, and love.

However, a so-called triumphal entry, no matter how peaceful, can be terrorizing to people because hallelujahs and hosannas for some, may be hells for others. (When Duke lost to Mercer in the 1st round of the NCAA tournament that was hell for Duke. At least, we can still be proud that our team probably has a higher GPA than them!) When Jesus enters Jerusalem the whole city was in 'turmoil.' Everyone's not saying "Hosanna!" The presence of Jesus shakes things up. He comes with peace but it isn't an eternal feeling of calming bliss by the soothing sound of the Caribbean ocean while the palm trees sway in a cool breeze and you drink a cold margarita (or at least for a Baptist, cold grape juice). Christ's peace, *pax Christi*, is a peace that stirs the pot. On the surface, a seemingly harmless procession becomes an earth shattering reality. When Jesus enters Jerusalem and it says the whole city was in turmoil, this can also be interpreted that the whole city 'shook' saying, "Who is this?" Jerusalem shook like an earthquake in the presence of the Christ king because Jesus claims the city's economics, politics, and culture for the way of God. This city would never be the same. Shaken at its very foundations.

Like the prophets of old whose words shook things up, and declared that the Lord shakes the mountains and melts the rocks, Jesus, the incarnate Word of God, shakes the world by his presence. No wonder they called him a prophet because what was happening was the very "shaking of the foundations" (Paul Tillich) of the world, as they knew it.

This shaking was not by military might and all the trappings of war but by an unarmed God only enfleshed with love. This love disarms because it's nonviolent and the most powerful force in the universe. The greatest of these is love because God is love so when Jesus processes into Jerusalem on donkey business, his love enters their world. His love meets hate. His nonviolence meets violence. And this will shake anyone and anything up.

Some of us have been shaken by news we received about a loved one through a late night phone call or news from our doctor about our health and we've been shaken at the core of our mortality and beliefs. No one wants to experience an earthquake in his or her life. Not even a city.

But Jesus overturns the tables of the moneychangers and reclaims the temple for his purpose after his entry. I can almost hear him whistling, "Shake it up baby now!" Shaking things up while he's on the way down. Stirring the religious, political, and cultural systems. Making us uncomfortable and unsure. Causing disequilibrium. The last time Jerusalem was in turmoil it was at Jesus' birth. Now they're in turmoil near his death. Jesus never takes it easy on us. Leisure is not in the job description of a disciple.

I know we like the status quo, the ways things are most of the time and don't want to be shaken up. But Jesus didn't come to uphold a status quo; he came to save the world from itself. Salvation shakes things up and it should shake us up. It's not until we are shaken that we may realize that we are in the presence of the Most High King. Jesus never came to make us comfy and there are lots of cozy Christians out there. Jesus came to change the world and us because of love. If we've never been changed perhaps we've never met the Christ.

He's riding on his donkey and he's coming your way. And it doesn't even look like a triumph, right? It seems more like a funeral procession for his impending death. I think I even hear someone in the crowd shouting "Dead Man Walking!" as Jesus goes to death row. But the people are in turmoil, shaken, perhaps not because it is his impending funeral but because it's their own, our own. He leads the procession that will end life, as we know it. The people are shaken because they don't want to die to the way things have always been. His donkey is a sign not of his Democratic leanings but that we must die a humble death.

There's a death walk this week. Christ's walk is our own. Maybe it will shake us out of our slumber. But know that it's not the end of the world; it's the beginning of a new one.