

“Entering Into Turmoil”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Palm Sunday – April 9, 2017

Matthew 21: 1-11

I am not one who seeks out conflict. I imagine most of us are like that. I am not one who enjoys “stirring the pot”, as it were, even though I know there are those who don’t mind doing that themselves.

Maybe it’s because I am an introvert by nature. It takes a lot of emotional energy for me to be with and lead others, and as my family will tell you, when I’m done on Sunday afternoon, I’m snoozing in my recliner! In other words, I don’t get energy from large crowds of people – I get energy from being by myself or with small groups of people.

That doesn’t mean I can’t handle conflict or large crowds of people. Shoot – I wouldn’t have lasted this long in ministry if I couldn’t do that! I’ve certainly had my fair share of working with people through disagreements or turmoil in their personal lives, or in the life of the church. I probably have some helpful skills in that area of ministry. But conflict and turmoil is not something that I run toward; in fact, I would probably run away from it, if I had my preference.

In light of all that, I’m not sure how I would have felt about being in the crowd that first Palm Sunday. My introverted self would probably have been freaked out by all the people who were in Jerusalem – my first instinct may have been to go to a hillside outside the city and watch from a distance! And yet I still would have wanted to see what all the commotion was about, who this man was that people said was the fulfillment of all the Old Testament Prophets, who people called the long-awaited Messiah.

But I also would have known about the other side’s position, of the Jewish leaders’ and Roman authorities’ concerns about this man, and the conflict which was awaiting him. My natural instinct would probably have been to flee, to run away, to be as far from the impending chaos as I could be. Would I have followed my instincts and fled? Would I have resisted my natural tendencies and stuck around to see what happened? What would I have done? What would you have done?

Matthew’s account of Palm Sunday is full of symbolism and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. But Matthew also reminds us that this day was not solely a day of praise and celebration. It also was a day of turmoil and foreshadowing of the conflict that was to come. And there was no question what our Lord chose to do: he entered into the turmoil with grace, humility, and purpose.

To begin with, there were thousands more people in Jerusalem that day than there ordinarily would have been. One estimate I read indicated that while Jerusalem would normally have had about 40,000 residents, during the week of Passover, the total number of people present could have been as many as 200,000 (John Rollefson, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 155). For many Jews, Jerusalem was the focal point of a year-long pilgrimage to celebrate this ancient feast. So there was already an air of excitement due to this annual religious ritual.

That was then heightened by the fact that several in the crowd had heard of this Jesus of Nazareth, had heard of his ministry throughout Judea and Galilee, and wondered if he was the one. Was he the one promised by God to save Israel and reign over the people as a divine king? Was he the one who would destroy Israel's enemies in battle and establish a new kingdom like that of David? Was Jesus the one who was the Messiah, the King of Kings?

It is very crucial for the Gospel writer Matthew that we understand how Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophets. Throughout his gospel, Matthew quotes the prophets to prove to his readers that Jesus is the Messiah in the line of David. In his recounting of Palm Sunday, Matthew quotes both Isaiah and Jeremiah in verse 5, and he's so concerned with this day being exactly how the prophets foretold it, that, if you read it literally, it appears Jesus is riding two animals into Jerusalem! In the translation we read from this morning, it says that the disciples "brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them" (21:7). This is directly from the quotation in verse five, where we read that the king will come to the people "mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

But, throughout the gospels, we witness the gap between the people's expectation of who the Messiah was to be, and Jesus' own understanding of his role as the King of Kings. The people have come to their understanding that the Messiah is to be this great warrior king who will overthrow all the earthly powers that have enslaved the Jews for so long. Jesus has a much different interpretation of his role as the Messiah, and it is that difference of understanding which leads to his suffering and death.

Based on the people's expectations, the welcome Jesus receives in Jerusalem is fitting of the hopes they had for their Messiah. "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" If this Jesus is truly the Messiah, then he will come and establish David's kingdom here and now. The people shall welcome him as a king who is returning from battle - with palms and cloaks and shouts of joy and celebration. This shall be the day that will be remembered as a day of rejoicing, a day of triumph for the Lord!

But as we look closer at the story and the events that follow, we soon realize that Jesus does not fit neatly into the people's impressions of the Messiah. This king of kings rides into the city not on a fine steed, but on the back of a pack mule, a donkey that has never been ridden before. In Matthew's Gospel, as soon as Jesus has entered amid such celebration, he goes straight to the temple and completely disrupts the day's business and trade. He throws the money-changers out, he condemns those who are selling and trading livestock and birds, he overturns tables and chairs and makes an absolute mess of everything.

As we know, later in the week Jesus teaches and heals and does things that challenge the Pharisees to no end. Instead of overthrowing the Romans who are in control, this Messiah is instead challenging his own people's religious authority, and in so doing he causes so much anger and hostility that it gets him killed.

It is Matthew's account of Palm Sunday that makes this a day not just of praise, but also of turmoil and unrest. In verse 10, we read, "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'" Some translations interpret "turmoil" as "stirred" or "with excitement." But the Greek word used here actually translates as "was shaken" or "trembled." In other words, "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken and trembled."

In fact, that Greek word is the root of the word for "seismic," as in earthquakes. And I don't think it is a coincidence that Matthew continues that imagery throughout Holy Week. When Jesus dies on the cross, Matthew writes that, "At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split" (27:51). On Easter Sunday, Matthew says, "And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord came and rolled back the stone and sat on it" (28:2).

What is happening today is momentous. What is taking place on Palm Sunday is the start of an earth-rattling week. What will happen later this week will literally shake the earth and all who reside in it. This is not just a parade and party; it is a tumultuous response to God's coming kingdom.

And Jesus does not shrink from the tumult. God does not run away from the chaos. Our Lord and humble king meets the conflict and chaos and tumult head-on. In his cleansing of the temple, in his healing of the sick, in his prophetic teaching, in his humble, sacrificial love for all whom he loves – Jesus embraces the tumult of this week, and in so doing, he embraces the world with his redeeming grace.

Our world today is full of tumult. Our world today is full of conflict. Our world today is full of chaos and struggle and unsettledness. Like I shared earlier, your tendency may be to shy away from the tumult, and seek comfort in solitude away from the chaos.

But do we honor our Lord by doing that? Am I being faithful to my humble king if run away from the conflict of the world? What are we called to do as disciples of the one who enters into the turmoil?

When we witness the turmoil of poverty, how do we respond? Do we turn away, blending into the crowd of indifference? Or do we follow our humble king who tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves?

When we witness the turmoil of injustice, how do we respond? Do we feign a deaf ear, allowing the noise of the crowd to drown out the cries of the weak? Or do we follow our humble king and the prophet's call to "do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God?"

When we witness the turmoil of emotional pain, how do we respond? Do we awkwardly ignore the pain of others, and in so doing refuse to acknowledge our own brokenness? Or do we open ourselves to healing and grace, and in that vulnerability provide a safe space for others to be made whole?

The turmoil is real. The conflicts will always be here. And our God will never shy away from what awaits. How will we respond - as disciples, as followers, as children of God?

"Look - your king is coming to you!" May we not be afraid to enter the turmoil, just as our Lord was not afraid to enter the Holy City for this tumultuous week.

Thanks be to God. Amen.