

A Moment for Mercy and Grace

Matthew 21:1-11 (April 5, 2020)

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21When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2saying 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. 3If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” 4This 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.” 6The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; 7they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. 8A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9The 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!” 10When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” 11The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Historical Context

Passover was a problem for Rome. To not allow Passover to be celebrated would probably cost more, via a general civil uprising, than it was worth. Yet the festival was a celebration of escape from Egypt which always seemed on the edges of a rebellion against Rome. To keep things under control extra troops would be sent into Jerusalem for the duration. They would march in from the west, probably from Caesarea Maritima, and make a great show of military might in an effort to dampen the enthusiasm of any Jewish activists.

Theme: A Moment for Mercy and Grace

The parades have been canceled. The palms have been placed in a corner or a closet. It is hard to imagine a Palm/Passion Sunday and a Holy Week that compare to this year. Despite all this, Holy Week will happen.

God has a way of reminding us, perhaps more often than we would like, that God is God and we are not. Contrary to some popular belief, God did not cause this pandemic to teach us a lesson. But a crisis of this nature drastically and forever is certain to clarify two things.

First, it prompts some rather serious self-reflection. Our very human instinct is to take over when we think God cannot adequately meet our expectations or when we assume that the protocols we have put in place are the only ways through which God can work. And how we navigate such issues can sometimes bring out the worst in us. This is not the time to take sides, but a moment for mercy and grace.

Second, a crisis of this nature shifts our perspective. It makes us see what we have overlooked, taken for granted, assumed; what we have executed rote, as business-as-usual. Not that we needed a wake-up call. But, “In the rush to return to normal, use this time to consider which parts of normal are worth rushing back to” (Dave Hollis).