

AN IMITATION OF LIFE***(Matthew 21: 1-11)******Palm Sunday***

As we enter this most holy of weeks in our Christian liturgical year, and seek a deepening of both our own spirituality, as well as our own spiritual relationship with God, it is important for us to know and be reminded of the *narrative* of the story that is being put before us as we begin our Holy Week journey.

Because knowing the narrative—which is the understanding of a story from the author’s perspective—is, I believe, key to having a clearer and fuller experience of the story itself.

For example, my lovely wife Susan reads a lot of novels now that she is retired, and as most voracious readers do, she can enter the narrative of a story and decide if it is an intriguing enough angle for her to want to read on to the end. Not being able to enter the narrative, or the

perspective, of a particular story could make that story a very confusing one to its readers or hearers.

The gospel stories are no exception, both in regard to them HAVING a narrative from the author's perspective, as well as us needing to be able to ENTER the narrative from the author's perspective for our fullest understanding of the story. One of the first things I was taught in seminary is that the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are not "biographies" of Jesus—and certainly not autobiographies—but are instead four different narratives that were composed by four different Jesus communities, all of which had different demographics, situations, and source materials; and those four different narratives have given us four different lenses through which to view the life, ministry and passion of Jesus.

For example, take our gospel lesson from Matthew this morning.

Unless we understand that the narrative of Matthew's *entire* gospel is as a *work of resistance* against the oppressive structures of the Roman

Empire and Jewish religious control, then we could miss the intent of the author of Matthew to see our gospel lesson today as *subversive political theatre*.

If you were here a couple of Sundays ago, you may remember me preaching about how we serve a subversive God—a God whose intent is to undermine and overthrow systems of *domination, exploitation, and oppression* that seem to be the status quo of the history of humankind, but which are in direct opposition to the eternal values of the kingdom of God. Matthew has Jesus, his disciples, and the diverse crowd that Jesus gathered on his way to Jerusalem expressing their resistance to the dominating status quo of Roman rule—and religious complicity in that rule—by not only mocking Jewish and Roman imperial processions; but by also publicly acting out and interpreting a well-known passage of scripture in its original—and subversive—context.

Both of these actions were meant to be seen as “acts of resistance” in a narrative by Matthew that speaks to life as it has to be lived by those who are under the control of dominating cultural powers. And one of the points these “acts of resistance” are seeking to make in this narrative is that the way that the status quo has God’s people living is not really life as it ought to be. It’s just an *imitation of life*; it’s life *perverted*; it’s an *inversion* of the values of life according to the creator God who GAVE us life.

So, in Matthew’s narrative of the gospel story, Jesus is the representative of the kingdom of God, who has come to resist the earthly and unjust kingdoms of domination, marginalization, and inequality. Let’s take a brief look at how Matthew’s story of Jesus entering Jerusalem is meant to be a story of resistance to the status quo, and how that resistance itself can be seen as a counter-narrative to the justifications that the status quo usually always gives.

II.

In Matthew's story this morning, Jesus seems to have already made previous arrangements to have a donkey and her colt prepared to enter the city of Jerusalem with him. The implication is that Matthew wants us to know that Jesus is already planning to make some kind of statement as he enters what is known as the "holy city" of Jerusalem. Matthew is well aware that in Hebrew scripture, in the writings of the prophet Zachariah, there is a prophecy that speaks to Jerusalem, to let them know that their king is coming—but not the way a king usually comes! This king will be coming to them in a humble way—not in a conquering way; riding on a donkey and her colt—not on steeds or chariots of war.

Matthew doesn't recite the next verse of the citation from Zachariah, but it's worth hearing so we can see how subversive God's values and God's kingdom *really are*, compared to the status quo that we often defend. Zachariah says:

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow will be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Zachariah 9:10)

The prophet Zachariah said that when the king comes, he will be coming to command a reign of peace, and we'll be studying war no more! From sea to shining sea, and to the ends of the earth, we'll be studying war no more!

So Jesus got on a donkey; and in a procession that was meant to mock both Jewish and Greco-Roman entrance processions, Jesus came riding prophetically into a city that loved to kill its prophets; seeking to invoke the claims of *God's empire* against the claims of the *Roman empire*; the claims of *peace* against the claims of *war*; the claims of *deliverance* against the claims of *domination*; the claims of *true life and new life* against the claims of *an imitation of life*. He might as well as had a tee-shirt on that had in big fluorescent letters "ZACHARIAH CH 9!" That

subversive political theatre was the counter-narrative of Jesus to the status quo.

III.

Even as the crowds that came to town with Jesus shout "*Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*", we already know that some of those same people will be shouting "*Crucify him, crucify him!*" by the time the week is over.

They will be adding their voices to the ones who Matthew lets us know are in such "turmoil" as Jesus and his entourage enter the city. The word Matthew uses is a strong word; the presence of Jesus, and the nature of his entrance into Jerusalem, has literally "shaken" the city, and caused the defenders of the dominating and oppressive status quo to suck their teeth, get all indignant, and ask in a huff "*Who IS this?*" "*This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee*" they are told.

They are not wrong about that . . . But who Jesus is is much much more.

In so many ways Jesus is new life; new life that is more powerful and fulfilling than any imitation.

Jesus has that and so much more to offer us for our own narratives.

During this Holy Week, Jesus bids us to come and see . . .

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