

## *Passion Promise: Betrayal and Blessing*

Matthew 21: 1-11    Matthew 26: 14-20

This season is different, of course. We won't be gathering on Maundy Thursday with the other churches in the community for our shared communion service, so I thought I would try combining the Palm Sunday reading with a reading suited for Maundy Thursday and see what happens. Today, we have two readings from the gospel of Matthew.

What happens when you read them together is the discovery of how much paradox occurs in these stories. It goes to the core paradox of our extended faith tradition. That is, we certainly want God's blessing and make great displays to showcase our supposed faithfulness, but in fact we would betray our faithfulness to the covenant, to our Savior, with a mere shift in the wind. That sounds pretty harsh, and it is, but I believe it is uncomfortably close to the truth for most professing to be Christians .

You see, the drama that unfolds in the week beginning with Palm Sunday is more about the conduct, attitudes, and beliefs of the players around Jesus as it is about Jesus. The ones who play prominently in scene after scene simply act around Jesus. Jesus remains the same person saying the same things and behaving in mostly the same ways. But the players are in motion and emotion. They are the most interesting, most reflective of the paradox in our faithfulness and commitment.

Matthew 21 brings the narrative account of Jesus' life and ministry to its fulfillment as Jesus arrives outside the gates of Jerusalem. A major concern of Matthew is to present Jesus as the fulfillment of many promises described in the Hebrew scriptures. While Matthew does not seem to have been a Jew himself – he may have been a Gentile God-fearer who worshiped with Jews, or he may have been a Gentile convert – he knows enough about Judaism to *sound* good, but he gets it wrong an awful lot, too.

With Jesus' entry to Jerusalem, he is sure to include the passage from Zechariah (9:9) which describes the messianic King's arrival in Jerusalem, the servant of God who would restore the city and the people, bringing peace, justice, and righteousness to the oppressed, exploited, and subjugated people of God. Zechariah's context concerns a political messiah who arrives before God violently brings the fulfillment of God's promise of a new Jerusalem. Therefore, we can expect that this symbolism was understood when Jesus rides into the holy city on a donkey. Jesus is not seen as some holy man, a healer and miracle-worker and teacher of wisdom, but as one with political ambitions.

Here then is the first paradox. The blessing of Jesus and his ministry has been reported throughout the countryside, but is now hidden away from view, even though he is in plain sight. Instead, the people see a national political leader to lead them to liberation, who fits their ideology of whom God will send to save them.

Matthew takes the prophet Zechariah's words literally so that we end up with an image of Jesus riding on *both* a donkey *and* a colt, an interesting sight to behold.

The crowd waved branches and cloaks and hands (palms only appear in John's gospel; there were no palm trees in Jerusalem). The crowd's cheers of "Hosanna to the Son of David" make the perception clear; this is the messiah, the Son of David whom God has sent to free his people.

Jesus' entry to Jerusalem is certainly noticed by the powers, Jewish and Roman. The Romans have a solid reputation for dealing swiftly and severely with any who would challenge their authority. The Jewish leaders have to accommodate the Romans, knowing their well-being depends on their Roman benefactors. A revolutionary who causes trouble for the Romans causes trouble for them. This bold move by this wandering preacher Jesus is a threat if they cannot control and contain him.

The powers have seen messiahs come and go. Some messiahs generate rebellions and others are simply best ignored, and if they're too problematic, they're dead meat, made examples. With the enthusiasm of the crowds, no one makes a move now. It may precipitate a reaction that causes even more trouble. No, for now, they would let the people settle down and learn more about what this messiah is all about and what resources he has. How popular is he? Is this excitement only temporary? What is his agenda, and how does he plan to act on it? Wait and see is a smart strategy ... for now.

They find his agenda both quaintly pious *and* personally threatening. He preaches about repentance and faithfulness to God. He defies *their* accepted teachings and interpretation of the Torah-Law of God. He offers his own interpretations in their place. He claims to have the authority of God, but all messiahs claim that to some degree, don't they?

At the end of our passage, the question is asked: "Who is this?" The answer is ambiguous and incomplete, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." Yes, he is a prophet, particularly referring back to God's promise to Moses (Deut. 18:15ff) to raise up a prophet like him to whom God will speak and to whom the people must listen. Failing to embrace Jesus' whole ministry of advancing the Kingdom of God, not an earthly kingdom, they miss the blessing.

When the people come to realize that Jesus' mission is not a national political agenda, there will be buyer's remorse, generating anger at having been misled. His teaching about the Kingdom of God, about non-violent resistance, about caring for the poor, weak, and vulnerable, about the universal human family of brothers and sisters, the true blessings that Jesus brings to God's people will be regarded as poor substitutes for what they sought – national political liberation from their Roman oppressor and the Roman lackies among the ruling elite and the religious establishment centered around the Temple. The crowds will betray him within a matter of mere days, casting him and his blessing aside as they demand a military Savior to establish a worldly kingdom, not a spiritual leader offering new life in God's Kingdom.

In the next passage *after* our selection, Matthew has Jesus going to the Temple where he drives out the moneychangers and marketers of items to offer in sacrifice to gain blessings and forgiveness. These corruptions of God's love and grace disgust Jesus and move him into a violent outburst. This, too, would be a crowd-pleaser. Many saw the Temple as a tool of the Roman oppressor, enriching the Temple elite – mostly Sadducees – by gouging the people with their purification rules and sacred designations. Jesus at the Temple is a protest event against the powers that are loathed by the people. But the people do not want the Kingdom of God; they want the Temple made holy at the center of a new nation free from the Romans and the wealthy Jewish elite. The blessings are there again, but betrayal will become the result.

We jump ahead in the week's events to come to the final gathering of the disciples with Jesus in Matthew 26. The selection starts by recounting the actions of Judas. The addition of Iscariot is thought to reflect his likely former affiliation with the Sicarii, or literally "Knives." The Sicarii were terrorist assassins who would approach certain prominent figures amid the crowds, subtly stab their victim, and melt back into the crowds. The Sicarii had a nationalist politic agenda, targeting Romans and their Jewish collaborators. If this is accurate, we sense Judas's dissatisfaction. Jesus has made the symbolic moves to press for popular revolutionary action, but it is fully evident that his agenda for the Kingdom of God does not include *any* attempt at violent insurrection to overthrow the powers-that-be. The blessing of the Kingdom was not for Judas, so he would betray Jesus to satisfy his own agenda not being realized.

In Matthew's account, Jesus and the disciples prepare to celebrate the Passover meal together. They have gathered for one of the most important occasions in the Jewish tradition, the symbolic participation in the events of the Exodus from Egyptian slavery into God's freedom. The occasion marvels at the blessing of God for God's people.

Everything is all set for the Passover as the Seder commences, that is, until Jesus says rather bluntly: "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." We can imagine all of the side discussions around the table cease immediately as all eyes turn to Jesus rather shocked by what he has just said.

After a likely desperate period of silence, one after another the disciples start asking, "Surely you don't mean me, Lord?" What could Jesus be thinking as each one believes that they are so true and faithful. They deny the possibility that they might be the one who would betray him. The guy sitting on either side of you may be a complete jerk, however, and throw the whole bunch under the bus – 'but not me, Lord!'

Does Jesus clarify things then after having dropped that bombshell into their midst? Jesus says: "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me." Okay, that means everybody around the table; they're all sharing the same bowl for dipping. Again, we can imagine more protests and more denials as the disciples descend even further into dismay and confusion. Matthew highlights Judas's particular voice among those saying, 'Not me, Lord!' Judas says the same as the rest, and Jesus simply

says: 'You say so.' Jesus isn't arguing the point, and the reader doesn't know if Jesus knows *exactly* who has and will betray him to the authorities.

At the Seder table of blessing, the accusation of betrayal has stolen away the blessing. Indeed, this betrayal will steal away the blessing of Jesus's earthly presence for all of them.

The passage continues as Jesus resumes the Seder meal with his disciples, despite the bombshell accusation. We hear how he took the bread, gave thanks, and, breaking it, shared it with his disciples saying: "Take and eat, this is my body." Then doing the same with the cup, he shares it with them saying: *Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.*

Jesus symbolically foils the betrayer's plot in this last supper. While the powers seek to seize him and end his life, Jesus takes his own life and gives it away in the bread and the cup. Jesus takes his own life and breaks it and pours it out, sharing it among those who have faith in him. In doing so, he denies the powers the ability to truly extinguish his ministry and his vision for the Kingdom. In the sharing of bread and cup among the disciples, Jesus is present, not dead but living, not crucified and removed but broken and poured out among many who continue his ministry, who share his Kingdom vision.

The players in the scenes around Jesus are the disciples; that's you and me. We should hear our own voices shouting in protest, 'Not me, Lord!' But it is so easy: the betrayal of the promise of new life with the sacrifice of someone else, selling-out the vision of the Kingdom in exchange for a bounty of loot, in exchange for added power, in exchange for our personal agenda to be fulfilled over God's agenda for the Kingdom. This means that every disciple who has ever professed Jesus as Lord and Savior – you and me – we have a prime spot, standing among the cheering crowds chanting 'Hosanna!' and seated with the others at the Seder table. The words are on our lips, "Not me, Lord, surely not me." And Jesus says, "So you say."

Today, we live in the paradox of betrayal and blessing. May we seek the way of the Lord and his Kingdom, humbly aware of the frailty of our faith while also embracing the sacred blessings that exceed bounds and expectations.