

<sup>1</sup> When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying 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. <sup>3</sup> If anyone says anything to you, just say, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” <sup>4</sup> This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: <sup>5</sup> “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.” <sup>6</sup> The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup> they brought the donkey and the colt and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup> A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup> The 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!” <sup>10</sup> When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” <sup>11</sup> The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

**Response to the Word**

L: This is the Word of God for the people of God

**P: Thanks be to God!**

**Matthew 21:1-11**

**04/02/2023 – Saginaw First U.M.C.**

**“NCIS Gibbs’ Rule #35: Always Watch the Watchers”**

**Rev. Amy Terhune**

Always watch the watchers. Because every now and then, one who appears to be just watching has more at stake than we’d think. They’re keeping tabs to see if the investigation points to them. Which makes sense, I guess.

From all that I’ve read and studied on the records in scripture of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem all those centuries ago, I think it’s fair to say that Jesus had his share of watchers. It wasn’t exactly a crime scene – not in the modern sense, anyway. But plenty of those watching had a stake in how events would unfold.

First, of course, were the power players: the scribes, the Pharisees, the temple leadership. Call them whatever you want. They watch. They look to entrap. They plot. They manipulate facts. You can paint them evil, those nasty bad guys, but they’re trying to hold a national identity together in the face of enormous suffering and deep political pressure. You see, there’s nothing Rome wants to do more than turn those they conquer into Romans. After all, Rome doesn’t have to invest nearly so much in troops and governance if those they conquer begin to identify as Romans. The Jewish people are notoriously uncooperative when it comes to assimilation.

They keep their laws, their diet, their rituals, their faith, their distinct identity. It infuriates Rome. And along comes Jesus, one of their own, performing signs, speaking truths. But also pushing buttons, and reinterpreting tradition, and questioning practice just enough to exacerbate the fissures of their carefully held-together faith. In some sense, Jesus was a radical. He called the people to a new way of understanding how God works. And for some, that was threatening. You don’t have to like it or agree with it, but if you do need to understand it if you’re going to really unpack the events of this week. There are always some who would rather keep the status-quo than risk embracing a dream that’s too far-reaching.

And then there were the disciples. I suspect that they were watching Jesus very carefully, too, hoping for a signal that he was about to start the revolution for which they hungered. Just before our lesson today opens, Jesus is in Jericho, listening to his disciples argue about who is the greatest, and healing those in need. Now Jericho is a beautiful, temperate oasis town about 800 feet below sea level located right on the Dead Sea at the head of Elisha's spring. It's also only a day's walk from the capital city of Jerusalem. But Jerusalem is 2500 feet above sea level, and though it's only about 15 miles southwest, it's a rocky, arid, scorching uphill climb through the wilderness.

From Jericho, Jesus can do one of two things. He can ride north along the Jordon River Valley north to Galilee—to home, comfort, familiarity. He can do the occasional healing, preach in the fields or on a grassy mountainside, and ultimately amount to nothing more than an eccentric, slightly kooky prophet with a pretty nifty skill set.

Or he can ride out of Jericho and head south—uphill through that furnace-like desert to Jerusalem, to the bright lights of the big city, the seat of power, the big leagues in both religious and state politics. He could go and start a revolution, make a name for himself, endear himself to the crowds, throw off Rome. And it sure does look like that's what he's doing. I mean, his entrance into Jerusalem has Zachariah 9 written all over it! If he's seeking to make a public declaration of Messianic proportions, he did it. Donkeys, palms, hosannas—this is how the Messiah is supposed to make an entrance.

And he's come to start a revolution alright, but it's just that it wasn't the one his disciples are hoping for. There'll be no throne, no Davidic rule, no sitting at his right and left in power. He hasn't come to spill Roman blood. He's come to spill his own. He's come to revolutionize the relationship between humankind and God. And it's not like he hasn't been telling them. In Matthew 20, just a dozen verses before today's lesson, Jesus foretells his death and resurrection to his disciples for a third time. He says point blank: the son of man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, condemned to death, mocked, flogged, and crucified, and on the third day, rise again. How do they not get this? I guess there are times when all of us hear what we want to hear.

The crowds are also watching. Like the disciples, they know what a Messiah is supposed to look like. They've been buzzing about Zachariah 9 for 500 years. They're watching. They're on the look-out for a savior. Scholars love to debate just how much attention Jesus' triumphal entry garnered. According to the ancient historian Josephus, Jerusalem's normal population at that time was about eighty thousand, but it could easily double around the time of the Passover Feast, meaning some 150,000 or more could have been in the city, all but living on top of each other for the feast. Matthew notes that Jesus' entry causes turmoil throughout the city, with crowds asking, "who is this?" and crowds answering, "this is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth." Many scholars agree. Given the crowded nature of the city and the fact that Jesus rode into town in a manner consistent with the prophetic description of the Messiah, he may well have attracted a lot of notice.

But other scholars say 'no'. They argue that Jesus came in with a ragtag little group and attracted no more attention than a small band of 20 or 30 protesters might gain in marching through Times Square. I'm a little dubious about making so light of things. If he didn't create at least some degree of turmoil, why on earth did they arrest him and kill him? But I'll be the first to admit there were probably a fair number of folks who either scoffed at Jesus or who had more pressing things on their minds—like making money, for instance. Passover in Jerusalem was very lucrative, after all.

But the size of the crowd watching was not as important as what they were thinking. And what they were thinking was "finally!" Here is the one who is going to throw off Roman occupation, claim the throne of David and once again make great our homeland, our promised land, the land of our ancestors. They were calling out "Hosanna!" which means "save us!" Save us from military

occupation, from oppressive taxes, from soldiers taking violent liberties, stealing our children, plundering our businesses. And I get that. The Romans were pretty ruthless in their governance. I can't imagine what it does to the human spirit to live under that kind of rule decade after decade after decade.

And yet, today, I stand convicted. Because that kind of horror still flashes across my TV screen. I'm frustrated that Jesus didn't fix it, didn't change it, didn't even seem to address it. Except of course, that he did. He turned over tables. He spoke truth. But even more, he laid down his life. My problem, I know, is that I still think like they did. It's the ever-cycling human condition. We still don't see the value of living love, peace, non-violence, tolerance, vulnerability in the face of systemic evil. We still don't think we have any power to change to world. Because we consistently undervalue the power of love. It's not a cliché. But it is slow. And we're impatient. And we tend to scoff.

If we truly lived how Jesus called us to live, I can't help thinking that our world would be kinder. Our spirits would be healthier. Our relationships would be stronger. The way we consume, and speak, and teach, and organize would be life-giving. But they didn't want to be saved God's way—they wanted to be saved their way. And so do we. And I can't help thinking that if all this was simply a case of mistaken identity, the people would have lost interest, turned their attention elsewhere, let Jesus fade into oblivion. But it's not that at all, is it? They saw what he did. They heard what he said. They knew God was moving. Jesus is only a threat if he actually is who he claims to be, and if he calls us to a new covenant and a Holy Kingdom in our midst.

Beth Quick writes, "If Jesus is the Messiah, then we really are supposed to love our enemies, count all the world as our neighbors. If Jesus is the Messiah, then we really are called to give up the material things that we call treasures, and trade them for treasures of a different kind. If Jesus is the Messiah, then we really are supposed to go where God calls us, follow where God leads, no matter how inconvenient it is, how difficult, how painful. If Jesus is the Messiah, we must relinquish the freedom to hate, to covet, to lead, to own, to control. We like change that excites us, but not change that requires hard work, internal shifts, sweat, toil, and sacrifice. Yet if Jesus really is the Messiah, then we've got to change. And nothing terrifies us more. [adapted from Palm/Passion Sunday Meditation by Beth Quick, <http://bethquick.blogspot.com/2010/03/sermon-for-palmpassion-sunday-palms-and.html>.]

And that is what makes this week so gut-wrenching. Jesus' base of support was broad, but shallow. This week, my friends, be watchers with me. But watch with the heart and the spirit. What the story unfold. Watch him wash feet, and feed us bread, and pray with passion, and speak truth, and carry a cross, and endure shame and torment, and spread his arms wide and die. Watch with me. And let it in. Hosanna! Save us! But parades don't save. Only love can do that. And it did. And it still does. Amen.