Matthew 21:1-11

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

I had a plan.

Back in February, when I was told that I had been assigned to preach on Palm Sunday, I came up with a plan. I read the story, the familiar words of the triumphant entry that marks the end of Lent and the beginning of Holy Week. And I knew where I wanted to go with the story. I had a plan.

Then a few weeks ago, everything changed. In the space of a few days, my world turned upside down.

On Wednesday, I was discussing the Holy Week services that were still several weeks away. On Friday, the schools closed. On Sunday, we worshipped on Zoom because it wasn’t safe to gather together in person. So much for my plan.

The story no longer pointed where I thought it did. All of a sudden, I wasn’t so excited about preaching. It wasn’t the right place. It wasn’t the right time.

And...and I was supposed to preach in the pulpit. In my alb. With the choirs singing the jubilant hymns of Palm Sunday. With the drums and trumpets playing. With all of you in the pews. (Okay, that part was a little scary, but still.) With the table and the font and the palms.

It wasn’t supposed to be this way. Not on Zoom. No, I wasn’t ready for this. I had a plan.

But the time came, ready or not. So, walking with the disciples, I journeyed through the text once more.

See, Jesus and the disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. With a crowd which had been growing as they went trailing behind them, a crowd wanting to hear the good words that Jesus was saying and wanting to see the miraculous things that Jesus was doing.

This is going to be great. He is going to put an end to the chaos and restore the world to order.
Then at some point along the way, Jesus pulls the disciples aside. Maybe they are resting for a moment or maybe it is over a meal, but whenever it is, Jesus tells them that when they get to Jerusalem he would be arrested, condemned, handed over to the Romans, crucified, and killed.

This wasn’t the first time, he’d told them this. It was actually the third time, but I imagine that each time he brought it up, it ratcheted up that sense of dread...that feeling that they weren’t ready for what was about to happen.

The whole entourage nears Jerusalem. Maybe the disciples feel a little like we did on that Wednesday before it all happened. They’d been warned. They are aware. But they don’t understand. Not really.

Now, Jesus tells two of them to go into the nearest town and find the first donkey they see, the one that is right there, no need to search high or low, and bring her back. This is not arranged. The owner is not expecting them.

But just tell them that the Lord needs them, he says, it will be alright. We will use these ordinary things that are right in front of us. It’s fine. If the disciples are perturbed by this, they don’t show it. But I wonder if they raise their eyebrows just a bit at this odd request.

Then Jesus, riding on the donkey, rides into the city. It has the air of a royal procession, but then...not. It’s a donkey, not a horse. And there was no plan for this royal procession.

So the crowd, these people that had followed them here, these people who were not the ones who would traditionally welcome the king, these people who were not even from this city, are using what they have on hand to pave the way for Jesus, the king. Their coats taken right off of their backs. The branches, cut from the trees that lined the road, the palms, the oaks, the olives, ordinary trees. Ordinary things. Not things meant for a triumphant holy day.

And the people in the city are stirred into a frenzy. “Who is this man,” they ask. “What is going on?” The city is thrown into a chaos of emotions. They are not ready for this. They aren’t ready at all.

I suppose they, too, have plans for the day. This changes it.

Austin ISD called at 3:30 in the morning on that Friday to tell us that school was cancelled. The seminary sent their messages around 7. All the classes had been cancelled for the day. Then the email from the church. We can’t meet in the church anymore. What’s the plan?

I imagined myself in the shoes of those two disciples, having been asked to walk into a strange town and just take those two donkeys. It didn’t make sense. It was happening too fast. But on that Friday, it’s what the Lord needed us to do, so we did it in a giant hurry.

Then came the hard questions about the long haul. How will the kids go to school? How will people work? How will we get enough toilet paper? This is too fast. This is not what I signed up for. What if we just wait for a few weeks until it’s over?

As the days went on, I found it hard to focus on anything. I was tired of staring at boxes of floating heads on Zoom. I missed the lost trip to Houston to visit with friends over spring break. I missed lunch conversations with Kimbol and Julia, seminary friends that I was used to seeing each day. I missed hugs from Juniper and Lorelai and Anders on Sunday morning. I missed going to the grocery store. And that was weird because I don’t even like going to the grocery store.

And at the church, more questions...how can we be the church without being with people? How do we feed the hungry in our neighborhood? How do we house the homeless in Reynosa? How
do we stay connected when we can’t visit? How do we worship without the sanctuary? We weren’t prepared for this. We were scrambling like those crowds grabbing the coats off their backs and the branches from the trees. Make it work. Change of plans.

And with Holy Week looming, how do we plan the liturgy? How do we celebrate the triumphant entry into Jerusalem of our king with no drums, no children singing, no palm branches waving. I thought, without those important things, what were we doing? It wasn’t the right time. Maybe we should just wait. Hold off until we could do it right. Until our circumstances once again matched our plans.

And then it struck me. Jesus didn’t ride into a town that was ready. He rode into a town that needed him.

Jesus didn’t collect fancy robes or order the very best branches. He didn’t have the royal transportation. And he didn’t come into a town that was ready to receive him. He came into a town that needed what he could offer on a road paved with what was available.

He didn’t have the royal procession with all the most important people. Well, actually, he did, but no one would have thought so. These were ordinary people with ordinary things. But Jesus sees what humans don’t see. These ordinary people are the children of God. These are just exactly the right ones. These are the ones for whom he rides with confidence into the chaos to bring hope.

He would upset the status quo and send the city into turmoil. He would rile up the citizens and then the temple authorities. Maybe if he had just waited for the time to be right...

No, in the midst of the chaos, the time was right. He knew it.

This is what he had been doing throughout his ministry. Upsetting the status quo and annoying the authorities because he came, again and again, into spaces that were not ready and provided what was needed. Healing the lame on the Sabbath. Feeding the hungry with too little food. Welcoming the unwelcomed. Saving the lost.

We can’t wait to celebrate the coming of Jesus, our king. He comes when we aren’t ready. He comes to places that aren’t prepared. He comes where he is needed and changes the plans.

And He challenges us, the church, to do the same. In a chaotic world that doesn’t make sense, that throws us curveballs, like quarantines and social distancing and Zoom worship, he calls us to be the church with what we have, where we are, bringing hope for the kingdom in which he is already king.

So, let’s let go of the plan. What do we have to pave the way for our king? Right now, right here, right where we are? Maybe this Sunday, it’s our creativity. It’s find the signs of life we find in our own spaces – our own tree branches and construction paper palms, our ordinary coats and blankets, our own possessions that we lay down for our king as we worship in our own sacred spaces.

We don’t wait for the time to be right, for the plan to be perfect. Because we celebrate our king who came to a city that wasn’t ready. We celebrate our king who comes to us in this city even when we aren’t ready waiting with what we have, where we are.

What do we have to pave the way for our king? Maybe in this season, it’s our courage... Our courage to say we won’t go outside today because we want to keep our elders safe...our courage to learn new ways to connect online that are uncomfortable because others need to know we’re
here...our courage to celebrate at the table and bath by setting up showers in the parking lot and dreaming up new ways to share the food in the pantry, so people can be fed and washed clean.

We don’t wait for the time to be right, for the plan to be perfect. Because we celebrate our king who came to a town that was being turned upside down. We celebrate our king who calls us to be the church even when we aren’t ready working with what we have, where we are.

What do we have to pave the way for our king? Maybe when this season is over, it’s our willingness. Our willingness to give up our conveniences to save the environment because every little bit makes a difference...our willingness to stand up to a friend who makes an unfriendly comment about someone because of their race or gender because we are all children of God...our willingness to keep finding ways to be the church when our plans are forced to change.

Because the time will never seem right. There will always be trouble. But we can’t wait to be the church, to be light in the darkness, to offer hope. Because we celebrate a king who comes to unready places, ready with exactly what is needed. We celebrate our king who calls us even when we feel unready to light the way with what we have, where we are, so all may come into the kingdom of Jesus, our Savior and King.

Amen.

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