
What Didn't Happen...

BOB HEERSPINK

We all know the story; Jesus sends his disciples to get a donkey, which, of course, happens exactly as he says it will. Then he rides the donkey into Jerusalem as people sing Hosanna, as they wave palm branches, and as they lay their cloaks before his path; but that is only part of the story of his final coming to Jerusalem. What happens next?

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

Hey, Bob; yes, I know the story, but I usually read it on Palm Sunday; you know, the triumphal entry thing?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; we are not into that week in the calendar, are we; but we have been studying Matthew, and this is the next story, and if we are going to make sense out of the flow of Matthew's Gospel, now is the time to take a look at it.

DAVE BAST

Well, plus, it is the beginning of the season of the Church year that many Christians celebrate, called Lent, when we begin to focus on the passion – the suffering and ultimately the death and resurrection of Jesus on Good Friday and Easter. So, as we follow through Matthew, we want to focus on the characters especially around the cross and in that whole story. That really is the focal point of Matthew's Gospel anyway because he devotes much of his material to it.

BOB HEERSPINK

But before we get into the people of the story, we really have to get Jesus into Jerusalem...

DAVE BAST

Into Jerusalem, right.

BOB HEERSPINK

And typically we talk about the triumphal entry; and I think the question that we have to ask in this program today is: Okay, was it really as triumphal as we make it out to be?

DAVE BAST

How triumphal was it?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; you know, we basically take this story and we preach it at the beginning of Passion Week, and it is almost like a relaxing moment where we can all just celebrate the victory of Jesus even before it happens on Easter.

DAVE BAST

Well, the kids have palm branches and they come down the aisle waving them and singing cute songs, and...

BOB HEERSPINK

It is almost a little emotional release before Good Friday; but I am not really sure if that is being fair to what the story is all about. Let me read from Matthew 21:

¹As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you and at once you will find a donkey tied there with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them and he will send them right away.” ⁴This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: ⁵Say to daughter Zion, “See, your king comes to you; gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” ⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted: Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest! ¹⁰When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred, and asked, “Who is this?” ¹¹The crowd answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

DAVE BAST

So the first thing, I think, to observe about this whole incident is how carefully Jesus orchestrates the whole thing. He sets it up; he makes it happen; he specifically tells his disciples to go get this animal; and Matthew says he does that because it was prophesied in the Old Testament that the king would come riding on a donkey; and the prophecy specifically is Zechariah 9:9, one of the last prophets of the Old Testament. In fact, Matthew so much wants to draw attention to the prophecy that he mentions the donkey *and* its colt; whereas, all four Gospels tell the story, but the other three Gospels don't make a big deal out of the baby animal. They just say Jesus rode in on a young donkey, but Matthew wants to make sure we don't miss the exact wording of Zechariah, because Jesus is fulfilling this prophecy.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; I think Jesus intentionally was fulfilling it. He knew what he was doing. He understands that he is coming into Jerusalem as the king, fulfilling these words from Zechariah; but as a king with a different slant than what we generally think of royal entrances. You know, the coming of a ruler or a conquering general to a city was very commonplace in the ancient world. Jesus is really modeling, in a way, his coming along that line. He is coming as a conqueror, but not on the warhorse – that is the way Alexander entered the city of Jerusalem years before. He comes on a donkey.

DAVE BAST

Yes, an animal that speaks of peace rather than battle. I think, too, of a Roman triumph – a Roman commander or emperor would be awarded, the greatest honor he could be given was to be given a parade into the city of Rome, and he drove in on a great chariot – a war chariot pulled by four big horses. So Jesus comes in very humbly in a way, but still a royal signal because of the prophecy of Zechariah.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; even coming from the Mount of Olives is where the Messiah was expected to come from. So you've got this high message when it comes to the Palm Sunday story: The king is coming; and yet, you also have these puzzling pieces that must have been confusing to anyone standing there saying: Well, okay; who is this Jesus? That is really the issue – is this the Messiah?

DAVE BAST

Yes, but I think the crowd thought so, certainly; because look at the way they reacted. They are waving palms and they are putting their coats in the road and they are saying: Hosanna to the Son of David. That is clearly royal acclaim – messianic language.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; what is so interesting to me is that in the days of the Maccabees when the Maccabean rulers in that time between the Old Testament and the New Testament came to power, their symbol was the palm branch; and so the fact that they are waving these palm branches is really a sign of Jewish nationalism. You know, they are really looking for big stuff to happen: Save now; save us; and it is like waving a flag; and no wonder it says everybody is shaking in Jerusalem because what is going to happen next?

DAVE BAST

It is very patriotic; it is very nationalistic, right; and we don't always pick up on that because we don't get the symbolism of the palm branch, but I think your example of a flag waving is really a good one because that maybe gets us more of the flavor that the crowd was experiencing. They figure this is it; our time has come; and Jesus has this incredible power. He has been doing all these miracles. Now he is coming into Jerusalem. He is self-consciously evoking or invoking a prophecy about the Son of David coming, and we are going to acknowledge him and it is our moment to rule. But, here is the question: Is that what Jesus is trying to say, or does he have a different kind of message?

BOB HEERSPINK

Precisely, because if that was Jesus' message, then how could it be that five days later the same crowd is calling for his crucifixion? Something happened – or maybe we should say *didn't* happen – as he came into Jerusalem; and we really need to explore that when we come back after a break.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Okay Bob, just before the break you said we need to think about what *didn't* happen on Palm Sunday. I think that is kind of an intriguing idea. We usually focus on what did happen, and the whole entry thing; so what do you mean by that?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I think we first have to say that there were great expectations on the part of the crowd, and probably great fears on the part of the Pharisees and the Sadducees as Jesus comes into Jerusalem.

DAVE BAST

Here is a volatile moment; we are going to lose control of the situation in a hurry.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and they know that if the situation gets out of control... you know, they are fearful of the Romans; the Romans are going to come down on them. So, you know, they are looking at what Jesus is going to do next; and I think that what they expected was that Jesus would either go one of two places. He was either going to go to Pilate's Hall and confront the Romans directly, or...

DAVE BAST

Let's have it out right now. In your face.

BOB HEERSPINK

Say the word and the legions of Rome would fall back; or he would go to the palace of King Herod and claim the throne for himself. I mean actually, back at the time of the birth of Jesus that is what King Herod the Great was thinking; and so...

DAVE BAST

Yes, Herod's father.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; so they are thinking that something political is going to happen – something military is going to happen – and it doesn't happen.

DAVE BAST

Well, it is always important to remember the historical background to the Gospels. I don't think we can really get the dynamics of what is going on in Jesus' life and around him unless we remember that Israel/Palestine was an occupied country, and the Romans ruled; and there were many different responses to that. Some people kind of went escapist and moved off into the wilderness and just said: Forget it; I will escape the whole thing; but many people were agitating and longing and looking for a political leader who would deliver them.

BOB HEERSPINK

Sure; all the people called *zealots* were actually zealous for the political freedom of Israel; and they were actually part of Jesus' disciples; one of them was even called the Zealot...

DAVE BAST

Simon the Zealot; and don't forget, too, that while probably most of the people didn't want to have a war or military action, at least at this point, they were all expecting that the Messiah would be a political leader. He was not just going to be a spiritual, religious teacher. He was going to be a champion. In fact, that is one way we could translate the word *messiah* – champion – hero – like the judges in the Old Testament, you know, who would deliver Israel from their oppressors. So, what would Jesus do? He comes in as the king? Surely, let's get it on. Let's launch the revolution.

BOB HEERSPINK

And that is the passage that we really have to explore next. What happens after Jesus gets to Jerusalem? Dave, if you want to read that for us, then we can begin to unpack what actually happened when Jesus arrived.

DAVE BAST

Well, Matthew says that Jesus entered the Temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. Actually, it is very interesting if you compare this with Mark's version. He adds the point that the cleansing of the Temple came the next day. So it is even more anticlimactic because Jesus enters the city on Sunday in this great triumphal, kingly way; and then it says he goes to the Temple and just sort of looks around and leaves. So it is the next day that he comes in. We read that he overturned the tables of the moneychangers, and the benches of those selling doves.

21:13 "It is written," he said to them, "My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers."

BOB HEERSPINK

So instead of focusing on the political powers, Jesus brings it right down to the religious authorities and what is going on in God's House.

DAVE BAST

And he is incensed, not so much, only at least because of the commercial transactions; that actually had to happen because, very interesting, if you delve into the details here; the worshippers in the Temple – the Jewish worshippers – had to have an offering, of course; an animal; but to that they needed to buy an animal. It was hard to carry an animal all the way down from Galilee or wherever with you for an offering – a sacrifice; and the people who ran the Temple insisted they had plenty of animals available, but you had to pay for them with special money; and so they made a little bit on that deal, too; on changing the money into the Temple currency. In other words, it was a profit center for those who ran the Temple, rather than a true place of worship.

BOB HEERSPINK

So why, Dave, do you think Jesus was so incensed by what was going on in the Temple?

DAVE BAST

Well, there was another aspect to it. The only place where there was enough room to set up all this money-changing operation was in the courtyard of the Gentiles; and so, the fact that they were carrying on business there, which was necessary in a way for people to worship, also meant that the Gentiles who wanted to approach as close as they could get by law were being squeezed out; and that is why he quotes again from the Old Testament, from the book of Isaiah.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; he says: My House will be a house of prayer; and if you look at that quotation in the Old Testament, Jesus doesn't add some words there that he could have added:

Is.56:7 My House will be a house of prayer *for all nations*. Jesus is really looking at the Temple and saying: This is more than just a Jewish house of prayer; this House is going to be a place that will draw all people to God.

DAVE BAST

And you are not only making it into a den of robbers, by doing so you are excluding the people that God wants to come to him and draw near and worship. So, no wonder Jesus is incensed.

BOB HEERSPINK

But now, Jesus also goes on and does something else in the Temple that I think is really significant. He begins to heal in the Temple. We are told that the lame come to him, and Jesus heals them in the Temple. So he pushes out the moneychangers. He pushes out the commerce, and he says: This place is going to be a place of mercy and of healing and of grace.

DAVE BAST

And now we ask, what does this have to do with the triumphal entry? What he didn't do was make a political act and try to establish himself as an earthly king; what he did do is sort of exert his authority over the Temple; pointing, I think, ultimately to the fact that with his coming, the Temple's days are now numbered. The Temple is going to be finished because something new is going to happen by way of coming to God in worship.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, there are commentators, Dave, who say the real trigger for why Jesus was crucified was what happened right here. What really incensed the Sadducees, who moved against him, was the way in which he confronted their total fascination and use of the Temple for their own purposes. They saw their own way of life coming under attack; Jesus now was moving, they thought, against the Temple. They had taken Jesus' words: Tear down this Temple and I will build it in three days; they took that literally; and they said Jesus has to be eliminated.

DAVE BAST

So, I am interested in exploring a little bit more the idea of in what sense is this a triumph and in what sense is it a failure, maybe – Jesus’ whole life and ministry? And I think that would be something for us to get into in just a minute after this next break.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to our *Groundwork* conversation. Dave, right before the break you asked the question: Is the triumphal entry all that triumphant? And I think that is a fair question because as I put myself into the place of those First Century Jews, I am sure this was just a huge puzzlement. Here Jesus comes; he is riding into Jerusalem. They think everything is going to really happen now, and Jesus ends up in the Temple, whether that same day or the next day, and in Matthew’s Gospel we are told after he is done with his work in the Temple he goes back to Bethany to spend the night.

DAVE BAST

He just goes home again, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

I’ll be in to Jerusalem tomorrow, you know.

DAVE BAST

Right; punching the clock here? It does seem like it sort of fizzles out. This probably goes a long way toward explaining the fickleness of the crowd. A lot of people have raised the question: How in the world could so many who shouted Hosanna to the Son of David on Sunday, the next Friday were shouting crucify him – away with him – not this man but Barabbas? Well, for one thing, you know, crowds – crowd behavior... People can be pretty good and decent individually, but people collectively, they are evil; and crowds can do just about anything. They are capable... when mass psychology takes over and craziness sets in... a crowd can turn like that and do ugly, ugly things.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and I think the fact that their expectations weren’t fulfilled has a lot to do with it. Their Palm Sunday expectations weren’t fulfilled; and yet, Jesus actually is being very consistent here. You know, the Gospel story tells of a Messiah who is both high and low. He is the Son of God, born of a virgin. He is a king, laid in a manger. That is the message that runs through the whole Gospel story: High and low; and you have that same dynamic here as Jesus comes into Jerusalem.

DAVE BAST

A king whose kingdom is not of this world. He says it explicitly to Pilate a few days later. He is going to be confronted and put on trial by Pilate, and Jesus is just very calm and even silent in the face of Pilate; and Pilate says to him: Don’t you know I can crucify you? What is the matter with you? Are you a king? And Jesus replies: My kingdom is not of this world. Yes, I am a king, but not the way you think. Yes, my kingdom impacts the world, but not how you are afraid. I don’t use worldly methods. I don’t use the world’s way to establish my power. My glory is something else; my triumph is of a different kind.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right, and I think it is really important, Dave, as we look at a passage like this to recognize it still says something to us as Christians today the way we carry on the ministry of Jesus. You know, what does it really mean to be successful? What does it mean to be triumphant in Christian ministry? Here in North America we place a lot of emphasis on numbers – counting numbers – the number of people in our churches, the amount of money that we pull into our ministries. Jesus is saying here: Be careful about the way in which you begin to define success the world’s way because that is not the way I operate in the world. I didn’t operate that way in my own ministry and I don’t operate that way today through the Church.

DAVE BAST

Well, we do have a lot of triumphalism, I think, which is not a good thing. It is sort of pride and... pride in numbers, as you say, and we are very impressed with success, but success that is of this world; success that is measured in terms that everyone, believer and nonbeliever alike, is impressed with; and once again, I think we have to hear what Jesus says and we have to look... I mean, how triumphant is it to end your life as a condemned prisoner, shown out carrying your cross to the execution place of the Skull and end your life that way? How triumphant is that?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; you know, I look at what happened when Jesus came into Jerusalem, in the Temple, and I say: Okay, there are signs of what success is all about. You know, it is confronting inappropriate consumerism. It is reaching out to the hurting, to the forgotten; welcoming them into the court of the Temple, as it were, and recognizing that those who are excluded in the past now have a place. You know, these become definitions of success for the Church today – for me, for my ministry.

DAVE BAST

The actions that Jesus takes in that Temple courtyard, first to overthrow the profit seekers and then to welcome the sick and the lame and the blind and the halt, and all, as he so often did – and the Gentile – the outsider – even the Romans, you know, the centurion, whomever – and really tell them that what they are seeking is to be found in himself; that from now on true worshippers, as he says in the Gospel of John, will worship God in spirit and in truth. It is not about the place, it is not about the Temple anymore; it is about Jesus himself. When we are living into that kind of life as his followers, I think we are experiencing the authentic triumph that he wants for us.

BOB HEERSPINK

And Dave, we can look to the future and know there is one more triumphal entry that Jesus is going to make.

DAVE BAST

Yes; all the big stuff – the razzle-dazzle – that is still waiting; that is for his second coming.

BOB HEERSPINK

He is coming again, and we are going to meet him in the air.

DAVE BAST

Right; maybe with palm branches.

BOB HEERSPINK

Maybe so; pouring out, as it were, of the city gates to meet him as he returns in triumphant glory – full glory – to a new creation; and that is the future that we look for.

DAVE BAST

And that time it won't be on a donkey. That will be the day!

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