

Ok... this is weird!

Jesus rides from The Mount of Olives into Jerusalem on a Donkey (Just as Zechariah prophesied of the Messiah), surrounded by disciples and Pilgrims who have packed the city and the route to it for Passover, one of the High Holy days of the Jewish faith, commemorating the emancipation of the Jews from Egypt. The pilgrims undoubtedly dream of a day when they and their land will be emancipated from Rome. As they walk to the city, they sing out Psalm 118 – the Judean national anthem, commemorating and anticipating God's rescue and elevation of God's rescuer.

Give thanks to the Lord for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!
Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord...
This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.
Save us, Hosanna, we beseech you, O Lord!
O Lord, Hosanna, we beseech you, give us victory!
Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.
Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Some people in crowd clearly connect Jesus' highly provocative, Zechariah-fulfilling journey, with Psalm 118, and the branches carried during the pilgrimage are laid on the road before Jesus' path, lining the way into the city.

Here's the weird thing... none of that is all that unexpected or weird. Jesus' Triumphal Entry is one of the most typical actions in his entire public career. He seems to following the exact script any would-be Messiah would... and that's so unlike him! It's so... unexpectedly predictable.

His whole public career Jesus has behaved strangely. He's leading a movement which defies expectations, and fulfills the prophesies for the Jewish Messiah in such unexpected ways.

His group of followers includes prominent women in critically important roles.
His revolution is largely focused on the poor, weak, sick, uncredentialed, and unfavorable.
His core circle is full of no-bodies from the hinterlands, far from the centers of power.
He's not a scribe; he's not a priest; he's not Pharisee; he's not a collaborator OR a zealot!
He's nothing... a carpenter from Galilee who fancies himself a teacher/healer before anything else.
The most dangerous thing we can tell about him is that he MIGHT have been born in Bethlehem, but that has to be a rumor... no one his age was born in Bethlehem – Herod saw to that.
This fellow is a nobody, from nowhere...

It takes long-term, attentiveness - eyes that see, ears that hear, and an open heart - to discern that Jesus may actually be the long-expected Jewish Messiah... only a few have discerned it. Until this triumphal entry into Jerusalem Jesus hasn't done anything so blaringly Messianic. It's so out-of-character, to be so characteristically Messianic. In fact, he looks exactly like every other would-be Messiah... and there have been many.

Jesus acts exactly like a King (even with his donkey ride) confiscating property and impressing it into royal service; Jesus and his disciples seem intentional about making this procession as provocatively political as possible. The pilgrims join in and amplify the moment, which makes it abundantly clear why the city would tremble and ask who is this? – the situation is politically primed to explode.

This story has unfolded several times before, with drastically different results.

A few generations earlier, Simon Maccabeus, successor to the, then recently, reclaimed throne of Judea conducted a similar procession. His family had waged a long and bloody guerilla war to oust foreign rulers from Jerusalem. Simon victoriously routed Judea's enemies and rode on horseback into Jerusalem to chants of Psalm 118's Hosanna on a road of Palm fronds. Simon's kingdom would reestablish Judean independence, and stake a claim to be the continuation of God's royal kingdom. In a few generations though, Simon's successors would initiate a civil war over the throne. In their desperation they'd turn to the new world superpower, Rome, to mediate the conflict. Rome's armies would march through Judea and into Jerusalem... and never leave.

Likewise, a millennia earlier. David would act quickly to squelch an attempted coup by his second son by hastily conducted a coronation procession for his son Solomon. David set Solomon on his royal mule (a highly regarded and regal animal in those days) to process through Jerusalem to be crowned king at the Spring of Gihon. The city trembled then too... not knowing what young Solomon's reign would entail. Solomon, however, would be the last king of the united Kingdom.

Even some of history's most powerful conquerors have employed this procession formula... Alexander the Great, and the Roman General Pompey recreated elements of it to conquer Jerusalem. Not long before Matthew writes his Gospel rebelling dissidents had attempted to violently overthrow Roman occupation and would've fancied themselves part of the Messianic fulfillment of these prophecies.

So, when Jesus acquires a donkey to process from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem, at Passover, to the shouts of Pilgrims cheering Psalm 118 – anyone who knows the stories would know the kind of spectacle taking place. It's staged during the most politically tense time of the year. It's all so predictable.

Another claimant to the throne stages a Palm-paved, Psalm-Anthemed, commandeered, Donkey-laden, Zechariah-infused, political procession to provoke a pilgrim-packed former capital city to remember the good-ole-days of independence. The pilgrims play their part. The city trembles as the retainers of power figure out how to deal with this would-be messiah.

Eventually they'll get the Romans to play their part and treat this would-be messiah like all the others... extermination.

When Jesus turns out to NOT be like Simon Maccabeus – not here to trounce the Imperial Occupiers... they'd rather have a failed dissident like Bartimaeus – who at least failed at trying to be Maccabeus – than a successful pacifist teacher like Jesus. They turn on Jesus... completely expected.

The whole scene... the whole week... is just utterly, utterly expected. It happened several times before Jesus and a few times after. Another would-be messiah... seems more like another "won't be."

That MAY be why Jesus is willing to be so uncharacteristically Messianic by re-enacting such a commonly regal entry into Jerusalem – because SO many had failed before, the expectation is that Jesus will fail too. By the end of the week, it sure looks like he did. Since so many would-be messiahs had their career fail to live up to their triumphal entries, what Jesus does on Palm Sunday is incredible typical of failed messiahs – which... true to form, is precisely why Jesus might want to follow suit.

What's Unexpected is that someone entering into Jerusalem in such a fashion would actually succeed in their Messianic mission. But, afterall, that's what Jesus is all about – the unexpected realization of expectations.

That's why he's leading a revolution of the mustard seed against the principalities and powers. The mustard seed which, as Jesus describes in a well-known parable, grows from such small beginnings into something so large and volumous that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade – fulfilled the prophesy of Ezekiel's mighty Cedar metaphor for God's Kingdom. Jesus' realization of the Kingdom fulfills ALL the practical needs of Ezekiel's cedar... but it's just shrubby. That's

the Kingdom... the unexpectedly shrubby fulfillment of God's plans.

We can almost hear the pilgrims and Jesus' followers shouting Hosanna Lord, Save us, Save us! On Palm Sunday, only to inwardly scream "Not like THAT!" on Friday.

As Anabaptists and Christians, we're already a strange people... accustomed to odd approaches to life. We're the people who balance grief and hope... who refrain from retaliation; who attend to the sick and dying even at our own risk; and who love through all avenues – including through distance. We're built for strange times; born of strange times... weird is just part of our normal life. May we live into the weirdness of Palm Sunday and these months... and continue to reveal and live into the unexpected fulfillments of our hopes.