

Palm Sunday, by Rev. Dr. Mark Caggiano, 3/29/26

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11

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.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus rides into the city of Jerusalem. We are told that he did so while riding a donkey and a colt. For any of you that has ever ridden a horse, you might be wondering how Jesus managed to do that. Was it a miracle? No, it was not. It was a mistranslation.

Not a mistranslation of the Gospel of Matthew, but a mistranslation by Matthew of a passage from the Book of Zechariah. Here is the underlying verse being invoked by the author of Matthew:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

Compare this with the “Palm Sunday” passage from the Gospel of Luke: “Then they brought it to Jesus, and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.” Now there is just the colt. Because there was always just the colt or the donkey, not both. This language is almost identical to the Gospel of Mark. There is a slight difference in the Gospel of John, the animal being referred to as a donkey, or a donkey’s colt, meaning a young donkey. Again, not both.

This imagery is intended to connect back to the Hebrew text describing the triumphal entry of a king into the city. Along the way, Zechariah was engaging in some poetic flourishes, offering a series of clauses to embellish the coming of the king. It was intended as grand language.

This is somewhat like saying, “The man, the myth, the legend.” There are not three things, but three ways of describing the same thing. In that case of Matthew, the author knew about the connection to the Book of Zechariah, but took the image a bit more literally, rendering it as a donkey *and* a colt.

What should we call this? Another embellishment, perhaps? The commentaries I read on this passage were rather matter of fact, devoid of judgements. I would describe this as a mistake, a mistranslation by someone who was perhaps not an expert in Ancient Hebrew.

And that characterization of a mistake might be upsetting to some because they have a particular view of the Bible. To them, the Bible is perfect in every way. The Bible cannot be wrong in any sense; we simply do not understand it. However, when three of the Gospels say one thing and the fourth says something else, something that makes no sense, I am hard pressed to come away thinking all four can be factually true.

And I do not. I do not think they are all factually true. Because the purpose of the Bible is not to be *factually* true, but to be true in its *meaning*. The meaning matters. The details do not.

And yet, you might say, if I cannot trust the Bible to be true, to be factually true, to be true in every sense, how can I trust *anything*? Shouldn't I just go home, jump into bed, and pull the covers over my head? Believe me, that has its appeal some days, but I do not think that is required or even advisable. I think it is safe to come away from this story acknowledging the triumphal entry of Jesus into the city leading up to the events of Holy Week.

We might have the same reaction to the stories about Jesus and the tomb. In some stories, but not all, Mary the mother of Jesus visits the tomb. In others, two women called Salome and Joanna are there. In all *four* Gospel accounts, however, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb. The importance of the story is that the tomb is empty, that Jesus is no longer there. It is important to acknowledge Mary Magdalene as the primary witness regardless of her companions.

These stories of Jesus were not set down until decades after his death, Mark being about 20 years after at the earliest. A story was told over those years and details may have diverged. Everyone remembers Mary Magdalene and Jesus, so we need not sweat the details, as it were.

Some of us always sweat the details. And some of us do not.

Yesterday, there were a few gatherings. A few places where people decided to join up to express their opinions. And by a few, I mean around 3,000 gatherings and about 8 million people. Gatherings in places across the United States and around the world.

I do not know what people were saying in all those places, but I happened to be at the gathering in Newton. People were upset. People were concerned. People were asking for change. Now, there are other people who most certainly disagree. If we were all in agreement, some of us would not be gathering in so many groups outside in the cold to express feelings of upset and concern.

And while I have my own opinions, I do not plan on inflicting those upon you today. Maybe another day. No, instead, I wanted to talk to you about what I mentioned earlier. About sweating the details. About the Bible and whether it is factually true or whether it is true in a different sense. And about how we might go about trusting in something.

If the Bible isn't factually true, how can I trust it? And by factually true, I mean that the events described in the Bible happened exactly as described. This is challenging in the case of the four Gospels because they represent the only major accounts of Jesus' life. Four different authors living many years apart and perhaps in different places.

If you take the four Gospels and place the passages side-by-side, you will realize that they are not identical accounts. Mark's stories are not the same as Matthew and Luke, though the other two share many of the same stories while offering some additional text. And John shares little detail in common with the other three. The overall *stories* are the same, however. Jesus turning to teaching later in life and wandering around with the disciples. Jesus challenging the authorities

in the Temple. Jesus being arrested, tried, and executed. And these stories are what matters.

When I am writing a sermon, I often imagine it as a puzzle. As pieces being assembled together to make a picture that you can understand when it is all put together. To further understand this image, it is important for you to know something about me: *I hate puzzles*. Jigsaw puzzles, crossword puzzles, those twisted metal loops you try to pull apart: I absolutely loathe them.

And I cheat at them. I look at the answers in the back. I check the internet for how to solve them, assuming I have no choice but to solve one. Not my bag.

So, when I assemble my sermons, I sometimes think about how to create a *bad* puzzle. Not an easy puzzle, but a bad one. Not one that you just need to look at the box cover to get the whole picture. Imagine instead puzzle pieces that can fit together in a lot of different ways, not with one unique location. I do this in my sermons because I am only able to organize half of the puzzle. You all have to organize the rest because you have the other pieces of the puzzle.

That might seem crazy, I realize. But when I am trying to convey to you a certain idea within a sermon, I am not looking to have you agree with me. I am presenting ideas; I am asking questions. Ideas that you can pick up and puzzle over. Questions you can answer in your own way.

I like to be right, but that does not mean I am always right. I like to offer up interesting ideas, but you might decide they are not so interesting. I like to consider questions that matter, ones that matter to you as much as they matter to me. And I am certain that many of you will answer those questions differently. The purpose of a sermon, at least how I write them, is not to make you think like me – the purpose is to make you think.

When I explain how Matthew mistranslated a sentence from Ancient Hebrew and told a different story as a result, I am not trying to make you doubt Matthew. A two-thousand-year-old story does not need to be a journalistic account of the events of that day. That story needs to convey to you something important. And in that sense, all four Gospels offer the same story, give or take some details. The details do not matter as much as the story being told. And if those details bother someone, I have no problem talking about that, as long as we can embrace the story.

Those protests yesterday are something like that. We are all watching a story unfold around us every day. Some do not like the story. Some are fine with it. If you are someone who went to the protests, or like the message of the protests, the details of that story may sound a certain way. If you do not agree with the underlying premise of those protests, about our nation going down a certain path, then your understanding of those details is likely very different.

One problem facing our country right now is that we are spending so much time on the details. Fighting about those details, wrangling over those details. We are so preoccupied with the details, we are losing track of the story. The story of who we should be.

One major political difference between people could be described as their primary outlook on society. More conservative people believe that society should be orderly and predictable, that

laws should be followed, and that lawbreakers should be punished. More liberal people believe that society should be fair and just, that laws should be organized around the benefit of the people, and that the fruits of society should be equitably shared so everyone can live and be content. This is of course a spectrum, with people sliding back and forth along it around certain issues and ideas. But on balance, depending on your primary outlook, one end of that spectrum is more important than the other and the other end might lose out accordingly.

Conservatives might want order taken care of before fairness can be sorted out. Liberals might want fairness to be in the forefront and if some rules get bent along the way, so be it. This is a classic dynamic that exists in modern societies. How we navigate these disagreements is the basic tension in any democracy.

It is unavoidable, but I do not mean that as a lament but simply as true. We cannot always agree. Agreement was never the goal. Compromise is the goal. But at some point, compromise became a dirty word. It has come to mean capitulating, giving up, not fighting to the bitter end. And yet compromise is the only way for anything to get done.

Years ago, when I was a young lawyer, I learned an old truism: what goes around, comes around. I practiced law in the City of Boston and quickly became familiar with the small group of people who frequently did my sort of work. We knew each other. And if I tried to twist their arm on one occasion, they would return that unpleasant favor at a later date. That would make both of our lives miserable. So, instead, we developed working relationships. If someone needed more time to mull something over, I typically gave it, and they would do so in turn. I might even convey to them when I really had no room to negotiate, and we could resolve certain matters quickly. And I returned that same favor, thereby growing and maintaining trust.

The problems we face in our country are generally not new. What is new is that no one trusts anyone anymore. No one trusts that if a compromise is made today that courtesy, that accommodation will be returned at any future date. In politics, this means slash and burn tactics that require flipping the government back and forth without compromises to the other side. This can lead to dramatic and disruptive changes or, more often, to complete deadlock. Sometimes it is better to make a deal that no one likes completely but that tries to meet most of what people need.

And, yes, I realize that there are certain things that should not be bargained over, like civil rights, like personal liberties. However, most aspects of government are not about those fundamental rights. And yet, somehow, it seems like every issue these days comes done to dueling pistols at dawn.

This is a question of trust. I do not trust the other side. Meaning I do not trust the other half of the country. But guess what? That means that this sense of unease is not going to go away anytime soon. Not after the next election or the one after that.

How do you create a sense of trust? By being trustworthy. By taking a chance to speak with people you do not agree with. I have referred to this as the miracle of a thousand cups of coffee. After drinking a thousand cups of coffee with someone, you still might not agree with each other,

but you might now wonder why you didn't start having coffee sooner. Because it is not about being convincing about this or that. It is about building trust. Building trust for when it truly matters.

And that sense of trust comes from sharing stories. Stories about friends and family. Stories about aches and pains. Stories about love, about life, and about loss.

Trust has nothing to do with the next election and everything to do with being there for the next cup of coffee. About building and maintaining relationships. About learning and sharing stories that matter. And the only ways to learn those stories are *showing up and listening*, which are honestly two of the hardest things in the world.

But here I am asking people to do difficult things in church. Difficult things out in the world. Difficult things like taking the time to listen and taking the time to love one another. Amen.