

John 12:12-16 Commentary

A Storytelling Commentary on John 12:12-16

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The context of the triumphal entry in John has been eliminated in the lectionary by making it a very short Scripture reading for Sunday morning. This story is surrounded by the motifs related to the resurrection of Lazarus and the imminence of Jesus' death. Just prior to this story, John tells the story of the anointing of Jesus and the plot to kill Lazarus (John 12.1-11). Mary anoints Jesus out of gratitude for what Jesus had done for her brother, Lazarus. Jesus defends her action against Judas' critique as a preparation for the day of his burial. The immediate prelude to the triumphal entry is a brief notice of the priests' plot to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus (John 12.9-11). The triumphal entry story is followed by the story of some Greeks wanting to see Jesus and Jesus' recognition that the hour of his death has come (John 12.20-36).

Two crowds are mentioned as part of the triumphal entry: the great crowd that had heard about the raising of Lazarus and went out to meet Jesus, and the crowd that had been present at Lazarus' resurrection and continued to tell the story of what had happened. "The great crowd of the Jews" learned that he was there and went to meet him not only because of Jesus, but also to see Lazarus. The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify and tell the story to the great crowd so that more people were believing in Jesus. The Pharisees then said to one another, "You see, you can do nothing. Look! The world has gone after him."

The immediate context of the triumphal entry and the way in which John tells the story is very interesting. First of all, when the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him. The carrying of the palms was a highly symbolic action that only John among the four evangelists reports. The waving of palm branches was associated with the Maccabean revolt and the establishment of an independent Jewish state.

Ray Brown has an excellent commentary on this story, pages 461-462 in the first volume of his commentary on John. I'd suggest you look it up if you have access to it. I'll summarize: three distinctive elements of John's story associate the crowd's acclaim of Jesus with Jewish nationalism and the hope that Jesus would establish an independent Jewish state. First, Brown cites William Farmer's contention that the waving of palm branches was evocative of Maccabean nationalism (167-63 BC). In 2 Maccabees (a parallel account to 1 Maccabees), when Judas Maccabeus rededicated the Temple altar after its profanation by the Syrians, the Jews brought palms to the Temple (2 Maccabees 10:7). Likewise when Simon Maccabeus conquered the Jerusalem citadel the Jews took possession of it carrying palm fronds (1 Maccabees 13:51). The palm reappeared on the coins of Simon bar Kochba at the time of the second revolt in 132 to 135 AD (the first revolt was the Jewish war in 66-70 AD). Brown concludes that the action of the crowd in John's story has political overtones. John implies by the waving of palms that they were

welcoming Jesus as the national liberator who would establish an independent Jewish state. Second, Brown also argues that the crowd coming out to meet Jesus was an expression used to describe the joyful reception of Hellenistic sovereigns into a city. For example, the citizens of Pergamum “went out” to meet Atulous III., Josephus reports that the city of Antioch “went out” to meet the Roman general Titus, (*Jewish War*, Book 7). And finally, John adds to the crowd’s quotation of Psalm 118—“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (Psalm 118.26) —the phrase “the King of Israel,” which is not in the Psalm. These elements of John’s story set the acclamation of the crowd in the context of the reception of Jesus as a national liberator. As a result, John’s audience would have understood the crowd’s welcoming Jesus to mean that they expected him to reestablish an independent Jewish state in the spirit of the Maccabees.

Jesus finds a donkey in response to the crowd’s acclamation: “He found a young donkey and sat on it.” Once again, John’s story is different than the other Gospels. The disciples are not involved in finding the donkey. This is a symbolic action by Jesus. The crowd is cheering him and celebrating with palm fronds with all of the expectations associated with the palm fronds. Jesus did not find a horse but a donkey. The implication of the donkey is that he comes as a king of peace. John interprets Jesus’ action by quoting the statement from Zechariah 9:9, “Do not be afraid daughter Zion, look your king is coming sitting on a donkey's colt.” Zechariah 9:9 is a celebration of a messianic figure—the Messiah King of Israel—who comes as a king of peace, humble and riding on a donkey's colt. John does not include the humble part though sitting on a donkey implies it.

The motif of a peaceful kingdom in the tradition of Israel is not very extensive but it is frequent and significant.

- (1) A description of God: “Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire (Psalm 46:8-9).”
- (2) Isaiah 11:6-9 is the proclamation of the peaceable kingdom in which the lion shall lie down with the lamb and its conclusion is: “Peace to those who are far and peace to those who were near and I will heal them.” The reference is peace to those who are near, that is in the community of Israel, and those who are far, that is the nations.
- (3) In Hosea 2:18, “I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land.”
- (4) And the classic in Micah: “...they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more...” (Micah 4:1-4).

This tradition is implied by the quotation of Zechariah 9:9. John’s understanding of Jesus sitting on a colt is that he came as the fulfillment of the promise of a messiah of peace.

John’s comment follows: “His disciples did not understand these things at first but when Jesus was glorified then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.” The things that had been written of him were, namely, Zechariah 9:9 and these other writings that are part of the Zechariah 9:9 tradition. The things that had been done to him were the crowd’s acclamation of Jesus as a nationalistic monarch.

In the aftermath of Jesus' death and resurrection, the disciples understood Jesus was not just the peaceable king of Israel but the king of the world who came to bring peace rather than war. Thus, they understood later that Jesus sitting on a donkey was in contrast to the kings of this world who come riding on war horses and in chariots, symbols of power and victory in war.

Thus, the character of Jesus' messiahship is revealed and celebrated by his victory over the power of death in the raising of Lazarus. The story of the triumphal entry is the transformation of Jesus' entry from being a symbol of nationalistic acclamation of him as the King of Israel to Jesus as the messiah who will establish a universal kingdom of peace, brotherhood and love in his triumph over the powers of death. John's retelling of the story reshapes the tradition explicitly into a story of a messiah of peace.

The disciples didn't understand the Zechariah reference; that is, they didn't understand the significance of Jesus sitting on a donkey. John later recognized its significance in what had been written about him in Zechariah and in what had been done to him. In retrospect, the disciples understood the significance of what was done to him, namely the acclamation of him as the King of Israel, by understanding his triumphal entry in the context of the raising of Lazarus and of the Zechariah tradition of the messiah as a prince of peace.

This motif is also picked up later in the Pilate trial when Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" and Jesus replies, "My kingdom is not of this world." In other words, my kingdom has a different character. In John, Jesus is the King of the Jews (19:14-15, 19-22). This title does not refer to a political kingdom, but rather to a universal, spiritual kingdom of peace.

The motif of remembering and understanding later is also present earlier in John's Gospel in the story of the cleansing of the temple. After Jesus drove out the moneychangers, John comments, "After he was raised from the dead his disciples remembered that he had said this." They remembered that Jesus had said, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). Jesus understood that his victory would be a spiritual victory with political implications rather than a political victory with spiritual implications. The disciples didn't understand the character of Jesus' kingdom, just as Pilate didn't understand.

This is a very subtle and transformative story that invites the audience to listen carefully to what is being said and to think about the significance of the specific elements of the story. It is profoundly revealing in the way in which it portrays Jesus as the Messiah of peace over against the expectations and hopes of the crowd. It is a story we need to tell and interpret in relation to this understanding of the significance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

A final note on a significant detail of the Greek text and its translation: Jesus' response to the crowd bearing palms and his changing their perception of what he is doing by sitting on the donkey is implied by the presence in John's story of a conjunction that is not

translated in the NRSV, NIV, or TEV. The conjunction is δε that can be translated as either “and” or “but.” It most frequently has an adversative meaning and is usually translated “but.” However the NRSV reads: “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel. Jesus found a donkey and sat on it.” If, as our study reveals, Jesus is reinterpreting the expectation of the crowd of a warrior Messiah in the tradition of the Maccabees by sitting on the donkey, the conjunction needs to indicate that contrast. In that case, the Greek actually says: “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel. **But** Jesus found a donkey and sat on it.” Jesus was reinterpreting what the people were saying and giving it a different meaning over against what they were implying by greeting him as king of Israel. He went and sat on a donkey's colt in order to clarify the difference between what he was doing from what they were expecting. So when telling this story, include the *but*: “**but** Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it.”

Have fun telling this important story.