

# “JESUS AND THE CHILDREN”

A sermon by Pastor James R. Blades  
First Presbyterian Church of San Luis Obispo, CA  
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Matthew 21:1-17

In my early years in Chicago, we lived in a tenement that butted right up against the elevated train tracks. Every few minutes during the day and numerous times during the night an elevated train would screech by and the whole building would rumble. One wonders how anyone in the building ever got any sleep or carried on a conversation. But, you know, after awhile we got so accustomed to the noise that we no longer paid attention to it.

Lots of the realities in our lives are like that. We hear something or or encounter something or see something or pass by something so often that we no longer even notice it.

Some Bible passages are like that too. The Christmas story. The Creation story. Noah’s Ark. Jonah and the whale. Ever since our early Sunday school days, we have heard these stories so often that we no longer really hear them.

I think Palm Sunday fits that category. Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey and everyone throws palm branches in his path. Yes, isn’t that quaint, we smile. And our attention moves on.

But stop to pay a closer look, and we see that this story has all kinds of screeching contrasts and rumbling tensions in it; we see the very kind of political and religious tensions that have erupted into murderous conflagrations across this world’s history.

Let’s take a closer look this morning at the Palm Sunday drama as it is remembered in Matthew’s Gospel: First, the stage on which the drama is set. Then, the drama’s chief characters.

First, look at the stage.

It is Passover week. Hundred’s of thousands of pilgrims throng into Jerusalem. The political tensions are so high, that extra cohorts of Roman soldiers are marched from around Palestine, garrisoned near the city, standing by to put down even the slightest flourish of Jewish rebellion. The Romans are no fools. They have learned from repeated experience how some military messiah among the thousands, on the holy day of Jewish liberation, can suddenly rouse the people to a nasty insurrection against their ruthless Roman oppressors.

Every year at Passover week, Jerusalem is a powder keg with fuses lying everywhere waiting for who-knows-what zealot to light the match.

Jesus rides into this environment ... on a donkey. That seems harmless enough until you reflect on what a dangerous and provocative demonstration it really is, for the Jews well remember Zechariah ancient prophecy: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout *in triumph*, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your **king** is coming to you mounted on a donkey; bringing justice and liberation.”<sup>1</sup>

And so the Jews turn out in throngs to greet the Jesus procession. The enthusiasm spreads like wildfire. “Hosanna!” they cry – not so much a shout of praise as we picture it but more a cry of emancipation. Hosanna means “Liberation now!”

As Jesus processes into the city from the Mount of Olives to the east, Roman governor Pontius Pilate rides in from Caesarea to the west, at the head of the entire Roman garrison.

Perhaps you can see why the Jewish religious and political leaders of Jerusalem were alarmed just as, for instance, the authorities of Montgomery, Alabama were alarmed when Martin Luther King showed up! Then Jesus, not to ease the atmosphere, goes into the crowded Temple Courts with a whip to confront the corrupt Temple economists.

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<sup>1</sup> Zechariah 9:9

So there you have the stage on which this morning's scene is set. Now take a closer look at the characters.

We read in verse 14: And *the* blind and *the* lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were shouting in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became indignant

The "blind and lame" are at the bottom of society's ladder: they can't work for a living and there is no state welfare, so they sit at the gates and near the pools of the temple, at the mercy of a scornful population, begging the few mites on which they barely survive.

Matthew's contrast is deliberate. Jesus has just chased the insiders out of the temple and now he welcomes the marginalized in. He has confronted the powerful. And now he heals the powerless.

And then there are the children, right where the children frequently are: in the midst of the tensions and dangers and conflicts and animosities of an adult world, doing their children's thing, shouting and causing a rumpus, shouting unpresuming praises of *Hosanna* to Jesus!

Matthew's picture of this scene is true to history and very true to children's character. For when adults, confused by their many qualms and sophistications, have trouble seeing the heart of a matter, children can see it intuitively.

Bruce Larson, who years ago was pastor of University Pres in Seattle, tells a true story that illustrates the point. One of Larson's relatives, a conservationist, was one day driving on vacation along the Florida Coast with her husband and five-year-old son. They noticed a sign saying "Naturist Camp" and assumed it was the same as a "naturalist" camp. They drove in, parked their car, and walked toward the beach. They quickly realized that this "naturist" camp was actually a nudist camp when they came upon a group of people, all stark naked, cycling along the beach. Their five-year-old stopped and stared in wide-eyed amazement. "Look, Mom and Dad," he broke out, pointing, "they're not wearing safety helmets."

Any teacher will tell you how often children see to the moral core of a situation that adults miss.

Child psychologist and author Robert Coles has spent fifty years listening to children from across the world. Here's what he says: "It would be a good thing if teachers and parents ... tried to listen to children and learn something from them .... Their observations are as profound as those from any religious leader, novelist or philosopher."

Cole gives an example from one of his thousands of interviews. "A black child told me—'If you want to know what is going on this country, ask the rich people. They decide.'"

The picture of this morning's narrative is clear: While the folks with all the theological training couldn't figure out who Jesus was, the children got it. They couldn't do the theology, but they could sense Jesus' character, his compassion, his kindness.

And they shouted it out. That's another thing about children that unnerves adults: Their unbridled spontaneity. They're angry? They fuss. They're hurt? They become sad and sullen. They're hungry? They cry. They're happy? They laugh and giggle and carry on. They're surprised by wonder and they shout. And so the children shouted out their praise in the austere and reverential temple courts.

Which brings us to the next set of the drama's characters: the religious leaders:

"... when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that Jesus did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David,' they became angry, and said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?"

Now some English translations supply the word "Do you hear what these *children* are saying?" But our NRSV has it accurately, for the word "children" is not in the original Greek

text. “Do you hear what *these* are saying?” These! So to be disdained, they don’t even deserve to be categorized or named!

In our day and culture, when we fairly idolize our children, we forget how most of the rest of history and culture has devalued them. In days not so long ago, a child was not considered to be fully human. An unwanted child could be abandoned or sold or prostituted.

In many parts of the world today, little has changed. Children still have no human rights, are still not protected from exploitation, are still abandoned and abused by the legal right of adults.

So in Jesus’ day, children were barely worthy of these religious leaders’ disdain.

Still, even in today’s children-focused culture, I think we may find ourselves secretly sympathizing a bit with the religious leaders of this story. We too want the little ankle biters to learn to control their childish demonstrations, especially in the august sanctuaries of God. “Quiet,” we say, “you’re making a nuisance.” “Stop crying,” we say, “or I’ll give you something to cry about.” “Chin up,” we say. “Smile and don’t be such a sad sack.” Even in this day, children’s training to adulthood is a process of learning to stifle passions and filter emotions and restrain expressions. And that’s not all bad. It’s probably a good thing we adults don’t go around being spontaneous with our emotions, stomping our feet when we don’t get our way. But doesn’t something get lost in this training to adulthood? Something of the energy? Something of the wonder? Something of the color and spice and spontaneity of our childhood?

Back when I was in seminary, I was assigned to intern at a straight-laced Baptist church. Some folks in the church came from the religious heritage where you don’t go to movies, don’t play cards, and don’t dance. I remember being at a young families’ potluck at someone’s house where they put on a phonograph record of lively Christian children’s songs. The children started dancing around the living room. One of the parents intervened immediately. “No, no,” she said with a note of alarm, “stop that dancing!” The children stopped, as if they had committed an immorality.

Fortunately, Presbyterians don’t have those hang ups, right?

Five years ago this month, when I was getting ready to take this pastoral position in SLO, I and a number of others from this church attended the Presbytery meeting where I was received into the Santa Barbara Presbytery. In that afternoon’s worship, they had a jazz ensemble leading in a jazz vespers. Now I don’t know about you, but when I hear jazz, it makes me want to move, want to clap, want to dance. And just about anywhere you hear jazz, that’s what folks do. Anywhere, that is, except in a Presbyterian assembly. I and a few others started to clap and move a little. But it didn’t take long too figure we were the only ones doing it. I looked around at these austere sophisticated Presbyterians. They stood there with their hands at their side, stiff as a board as if to say, “We’re not going to clap and you can’t make us!”

Perhaps we can identify more with those Scribes and Pharisees then we want to admit. God help us if any childish enthusiasm should break loose in our worship!

Let us turn now to the remaining and most important character of Matthew’s story: Jesus.

“Do you hear what these are saying?” the Scribes and Pharisees challenge. To which Jesus masterfully replies, “Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared (more accurately, *perfected*) praise for yourself?’”

Here Jesus shows his attitude toward children; indeed, God’s attitude toward children. The children shall not be silenced says Jesus, for it is in their impertinent shouts, their guileless expression, their self-forgetful praise, their tumultuous enthusiasm, their open-mouthed wonder, their intuitive trust, that God hears the most perfect praise.

One day shortly after this incident, Jesus’ disciples were arguing among themselves about who among them was the greatest. And do you remember what Jesus did? He called a child into their midst.

"I tell you most solemnly," he said, "unless you are converted and become like this child, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."

Now when we hear that word, "converted," we first think of religious conversion. But it means something quite more simply. It means to change direction.

When I was a kid, whenever my dad wanted me to become more responsible and not act like such an idiot, he would say (I can still hear his voice like it was yesterday): "Grow up!"

Here's what Jesus is saying to his disciples: "If you want in on the kingdom of God, then you must *grow down!*"

G.K. Chesterton said, "I think God is the only child left in the Universe, and all the rest of us have grown old and cynical because of sin."

It's true.

We may be sophisticated, but our sophistication will never win points with God. We may be wealthy and influential but our wealth and influence will never impress God. We may be powerful and skillful and persuasive and worldly wise. But when it comes time to approach God, none of those things will get us a standing.

The only way to gain an audience in the courts of God is with the honest, straight, guileless, humility of a child. Today on this Palm Sunday when we welcome King Jesus, we also celebrate the children who have ever welcomed him; for "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child," said Jesus, "will never get in on it."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 10:17