

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

I try not to use sports references in sermons, unless I have to; when there is no better illustration. “Opening Day” is my title today. Opening day for the 2017 baseball season was last Sunday. The schedule of 162 action-packed games has begun. It all counts now: hits and runs, wins and losses. Major League Baseball is now set in motion: hold onto your hats (or caps)!

Jesus enters the holy city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday; opening day for the dramatic events of the week. We know the story, though each gospel tells it a little bit differently. Matthew, you may recall, is the gospel writer who provides the intriguing detail that Jesus rode into town on two animals, at the same time: a donkey and a baby donkey. That’s what it says. Matthew aligns the procession, to a “t”, with the words of the prophet Zechariah: “Say to daughter Zion, ‘Look, your king is coming to you, humble and riding on a donkey, and on a colt the donkey’s offspring.’” Who wouldn’t want to go out to see this guy riding into town, like that? We might watch it too. Matthew reports the feat: “The disciples brought the donkey and the colt and laid their clothes on them. Then he sat on them.” Then, the author moves on to other details. Obviously, what matters here is that scripture is fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus did just as Zechariah prophesied; doing what it says. It counts now. He entered the holy city as a man of peace, on a donkey, and its colt. He did not ride a horse, which would symbolize military power. Jesus entered humbly, as a man of peace power; an entirely different kind of king. On opening day.

The crowd showered him with praise, spreading their clothes on the road, cutting palm branches down and laying them on the road. They opened up entry to their city, they opened their hands, they laid open the way, with clothing and palms, and they opened their mouths, with praise: “Hosanna (Lord, please save us) to the Son of David! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna (Lord, please save us) in the highest!” Caught up in the moment. Stirred up by the arrival of this one, sent by the Lord, embodying their hope for God’s salvation. There, at the entry of Him who opens evil to good, opens dark to light, opens pain to healing, despair to hope, death to life; who cares how many animals he is riding. This is the One, it’s **opening** day!

“And when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up.” Esei<sup>sthe</sup> is the Greek word translated: “stirred up”. Ever known a city, or community, or a group of people being stirred up? A family, a couple, a home stirred up? Here, as recorded on Palm Sunday, the stirred-upness is pinned on Jesus’ arrival on the scene. Let us be careful about rushing to the conclusion that if people are shaken up, if our lives are troubled, that that means Jesus is **not** there. Riding two animals, a donkey and a colt at the same time, didn’t stir them up as much as Jesus being present.

That same Greek word, eseisthe, will be used again by Matthew. In chapter 27, on Friday, immediately after Jesus died on the cross, he writes, “The curtain of the

sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook (eseisthe), the rocks split, and the bodies of many people who had died were raised.” (Matt. 27:51-52) That is not an idle, short-term, no-lasting-impact stirring. It is transformational, with historic dimensions, opening a new epoch in God’s salvation history. Hosanna, save us please. Opening day. Earth-shaking. “As the bodies of many people who had died were raised.”

Remember, we play on that same field; it’s the same season, from that opening day. After that epic weekend; the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We know the One who rode on a donkey and a colt **did** come to save his people. He is the stone, recorded in Psalm 118, rejected by the builders who is now the main foundation stone. “He has shined a light on us!” And we praise his saving entry, in the same way, as things get all stirred up.

I’m thinking about a sister church in our own backyard: Valley Presbyterian Church in Green Valley. Since July of last year, I have served on a Commission which was formed to address the disorder rattling that church: members leaving, desperate anxiety, intense conflict, embattled leadership. The church was all stirred up. The shaking and quaking reached its lowest, most tragic point when their Pastor/Head of Staff took his own life at the end of August. The church will tell you that Jesus did not abandon them during their time of trouble. I also firmly believe that Jesus did not leave their pastor during his darkest moments of pain and despair. Their church is being transformed, through their faith in Jesus Christ and what Jesus brings to save. A couple weeks ago, their transitional pastor came to begin his ministry. His arrival will stir people up – bringing hope for a new future and leading God’s people into new openings. Lord, please save us.

Psalm 118, the psalm Tomas read, which previewed the shouts of the crowd as Jesus entered Jerusalem, begins and closes with exactly the same sentence: “Give thanks to the Lord because he is good, because his faithful love (hesed) lasts forever.” In the calm times, and in the stirred up, bewildering, painful times. In the losses and the upheaval, in tragedy and triumph, in dull routines and when nothing at all makes any sense. His faithful love lasts forever.

May we open ourselves, anew, at those times when we are shook up; it could be the surprising entry of God’s saving love. A new opening day. We pray “hosanna” - Lord, please save us – and guess who arrives! That Greek word, eseisthe, is also translated “tremble”. (Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble. Were you there?) It can also mean “mental agitation”. Or something new is “set in motion”. It may mean Jesus is here.

In my lifetime, as a culture, we have been constantly stirred up about one thing or another: racial equality, gender equality, economic justice, issues of war and peace, rich and poor, privilege and discrimination. I wonder, whether it has been Jesus getting us all stirred up, unsettling us, to direct us toward justice. As if Jesus agitates our minds

and troubles our hearts to rethink false assumptions, correct damaging behavior, rearrange priorities, and hear fresh voices to set God's steadfast love in motion.

If we can imagine Jesus, riding into Jerusalem, on two different four legged creatures at the same time, a donkey and a colt, different heights and speeds, eight donkey legs beneath him, keeping his balance, staying upright, and moving forward. Looking kingly and peaceful, while, the whole time, struggling to hold it all together. Jesus is good! If Jesus can manage that, to fulfill the exact words of scripture, how about us, in his footsteps, with the same lasting love of God? The road may get difficult. Our equilibrium may be thrown off. It may become overly perplexing and bewildering: why in the world must we do this? But we do, like Jesus, what righteousness requires; we were never promised a smooth ride. With rich and poor, holding together. Black and white and brown as one people. Male and female equal. Young and old, liberal and conservative with mutual respect. Disabled and abled moving forward at the same pace. Gay and straight, walking the same road as partners. It's an open road. It all counts now: all are forgiven, all saved, all loved. **This** is the day that the Lord has made. "Give thanks to the Lord because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever."