

# St James United Church



## Message for March 29, 2026

### Palm Sunday

“True Salvation” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Matthew 21:1-11

It's often said in the United Church that we take the bible seriously but not literally. I am glad of that as we recall Matthew's version of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, otherwise we'd be left trying to make sense of how Jesus could ride into the city on the back of a donkey and a colt at the same time. I read the passage to Glen, and his reaction was “I don't get it. Was he rodeo riding?” He didn't mean to be glib. He genuinely couldn't figure out how to picture what I'd read, and the same is true for most of us. Thankfully, we don't need to take it literally, can consider what Matthew meant symbolically when he added an extra animal.

So, what does it mean symbolically? First off, Matthew makes clear that Jesus is echoing a prophecy, almost the words of Zechariah: “Rejoice O daughter of Zion! Shout O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold your king comes to you, . . . humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt.” At first, you wonder if Matthew is being literal and not symbolic, missing the Jewish technique of parallelism to emphasize a point, the prophet using Zion and Jerusalem together, Zion being the temple mount and so meaning Jerusalem, then using donkey and colt together. Zechariah affirmed that a king was on his way. For Matthew that is Jesus. But according to Catherine Sider Hamilton, he also drew on another passage, changing the language of Zechariah to echo Genesis 49:10-11 where Judah was promised to always have a ruler, a passage later associated with the hope for a future Messiah. Matthew underlined that Jesus was not just a king but that Messiah, a point emphasized further as people hailed him Son of David. I see in this Matthew making sure we know that Jesus' aim was spiritual. This is key because the people misunderstood what he came for, their joy turning to disappointment when he didn't begin a revolt against the Romans but, as we will soon hear, clashed instead with the religious establishment.

Jesus didn't live out the messiahship that was expected. The people counted on a salvation more Greco-Roman than Hebrew, a salvation of safety, protection. And if it was to be the Hebrew meaning, salvation as liberation, they wanted it reframed as routing enemies not lifting up the disenfranchised. That notion of salvation is one that we're drawn to, our preference for a salvation of safety broadcast on TV. We see it as the US and Israel battle Iran, as Russia keeps battling with Ukraine, as Gazans are denied needed aid and Israeli settlers attack Palestinians, as the US uses an oil embargo to try and topple the Cuban government, as premiers push for harsher prison sentences rather than get to crime's root causes, as the IOC bans trans athletes when only one trans woman has competed in the Olympics and risk restoring practices that hurt female athletes. Again and again we show our preference for salvation as “safety”.

But salvation in the Hebrew is about liberation, and though the people's focus was on themselves, God's liberation as announced by prophets was always larger than what they or we imagine, restoration that expands to embrace others. This the saving Jesus brought was spiritual liberation, restoring relationships with others and not just God. He came showing us that the salvation we need is not overtaking enemies so that we feel safe but healing the rift that made them enemies in the first place, healing the hurts and angers that fuel our enmity and restoring us to living community. Jesus does this by healing our broken hearts so we in turn can heal our broken bonds. He rode into the city on a humble donkey to remind us that we gain this only as we let go of a need to be right, let go of the desire to impose that on others and instead choose right relationships, choose to be reconciled with one another in God's love.

The people's failure to grasp this shifted their triumphant welcome into calls for Jesus' death. And though that is too often where we go, thankfully we're given Holy Week each year to learn a different way, the one taught by a Messiah who saves us from ourselves, calling us not to the way of dominance, anger and vengeance but of humility, love, and reconciliation. Amen.