

Matthew 8 “The Power of the King: Living the Sermon on the Mount” March 29, 2015
Micah 4
Psalm 24

On Palm Sunday we celebrate the day that a scruffy-looking itinerant preacher was treated like a King.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey –
the same way that Solomon had done a thousand years before.
On that day the crowds followed Jesus, cheered for Jesus,
and proclaimed him the Son of David – the great King whom Israel awaited.

Micah 4 announces the coming of the day of the LORD,
when God will establish the mountain of the house of the LORD
as the “highest of the mountains.”
Obviously, Jerusalem will never reach that height.
The mountain of the house of the LORD is the *heavenly* Mt Zion!

After all, Palm Sunday itself was only an anticipation of the more glorious
ascension of Jesus to the right hand of the Father.

And that’s why we are singing in response, Psalm 24 –
“Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart...”

Jesus is the King of Glory.

Sing Psalm 24
Read Matthew 8

On Palm Sunday we remember the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.

Our passage for today sets the stage for Palm Sunday.
Why did the crowds proclaim “Hosanna to the Son of David”?
It was because of the sort of thing they had seen and heard from Jesus in Matthew 8-9.

Chapters 8-9 of Matthew’s gospel form a single story with a single message
regarding the *power* of the King.

Chapter 9 concludes by saying,
“Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages,
teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom
and healing every disease and every affliction.” (9:35)

If that sounds familiar,
that's because it is almost identical to Matthew 4:23 –

“And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues
and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom
and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.”

Matthew 4:23 and Matthew 9:35 provide us with “book ends” around Matthew’s summary
of the basic Message and Power of the King.

The Message of the King was summarized in chapters 5-7.
The Power of the King is now revealed in chapters 8-9.

Here, in chapters 8-9, the Sermon on the Mount comes to life.

Here, Jesus blesses the poor in spirit – those who mourn –
Jesus blesses the meek – those who hunger and thirst for righteousness –
those who long for things to be the way they should be!
Here, Jesus shows us what it means for him to fulfill the Law and the Prophets.
He lets his light shine before men so that they might see his good works –
yet he does not do this in order to be praised by men.
Here, Jesus seeks first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.
And in the midst of this, he shows us what it means to follow *him*.

Nine times in these two chapters, we hear the verb “to follow,”
including five times in our chapter today:

Great crowds followed him (8:1)
Jesus speaks to “those who followed him” (8:10)
A scribe promises, “I will follow you” (8:19)
Jesus says to another, “Follow me.” (8:22)
And his disciples “followed him.” (8:23)

What does it mean to *follow* Jesus?

As we go through our passage today,
I want you to ask yourself, “who am *I* in this story?”
After all, you and I are *not* Jesus.
Where do we see ourselves in this story?

I hope that you and I are like the people who came to Jesus,
believed Jesus, and followed Jesus.
But all through these stories there is another option.
There are those who stand around and watch and listen.
There are those who hear the words of Jesus,
they *like* the words of Jesus,
but they *do not do them*.

1. Fulfilling the Law: A Leper Cleansed (v1-4)

When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. ² And behold, a leper^[a]
came to him and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” ³ And

Jesus^[b] stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.” And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. ⁴ And Jesus said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to them.”

Matthew connects this section with the Sermon on the Mount with a simple transition:

“When he came down from the mountain...”

Jesus is now going to demonstrate what he just said in the Sermon on the Mount.

In chapter 5, Jesus said that he did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them.

You can see how he expresses this in the cleansing of the leper.

He tells the leper to “go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded” (v4).

He tells the man to follow the Law.

But some might say, what about Jesus?

After all, if you go back and re-read the Law in Leviticus,

Leviticus 14 is very clear that anyone who touches a leper becomes unclean.

The principle in the Law is that the unclean contaminates the clean.

“And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him...”

Did Jesus become unclean by touching the leper?

Obviously not – because the leper was cleansed by Jesus’ touch.

What I find fascinating is that *even the Pharisees* did not claim that Jesus became unclean by touching lepers.

You find all sorts of accusations against Jesus in the gospels.

But no one ever says, “He is unclean because he touches lepers.”

Why not?

Because it is too obvious!

In Jesus the world has turned upside down.

No longer does the unclean contaminate the clean!

Now the cleanness of Jesus is so powerful that it *decontaminates* the unclean.

This principle pervades the New Testament.

In Ezra and Nehemiah, intermarrying with idolaters contaminated Israel – to the point that God told them to send away their foreign wives, *with the children*.

In other words, the children were contaminated by uncleanness!

But Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7 (following the principle here in Matthew 8), that the presence of a believing spouse *sanctifies* the unbelieving spouse, so that your children are holy –

and Paul adds, “otherwise your children would be unclean.
But as it is, they are holy.”

Do you believe that Jesus can cleanse the unclean?

The leper was the classic “other” in the ancient world –
the outcast – the “untouchable.”

And that was *us*.

2. “Ask and You Shall Receive”: A Centurion’s Servant Healed (v5-13)

⁵ When he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, ⁶ “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.” ⁷ And he said to him, “I will come and heal him.” ⁸ But the centurion replied, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹ For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my servant,^[c] ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus had said, “Ask, and it will be given.”

Here a centurion – a Gentile – comes to Jesus and *asks*.

Do you know what makes this particularly ironic?

In 6:32, Jesus had said that “the Gentiles seek” food, drink, and clothing –
but *you* should seek first the Kingdom.

But here, there is a Gentile who seeks first the kingdom of God!

The centurion understands the chain of command.

When someone in authority speaks, it gets done.

The centurion – this Gentile soldier – understands that if Jesus says the word,
it will be done.

Notice Jesus’ response:

he *marveled*.

Think for a moment:

where do you see people “marveling” in the gospels?

The disciples will marvel in verse 27, “even winds and sea obey him.”

In the next chapter, the crowds marvel when Jesus heals the mute,
“Never was anything like this seen in Israel,” they say (9:33)

The crowds will still be marveling in chapter 15 –

and again when Jesus teaches at the temple during Passover week (Mt 21 and 22)

Here *Jesus* marveled.

It’s true that Jesus had come in order to break down the barrier between Jew and Gentile.

But that hadn’t happened yet!

Here is a Gentile who “gets it” before there is anything to *get*.

¹⁰ *When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel^[d] have I found such faith.*

And Jesus then reflects on the coming banquet in the kingdom of heaven:

¹¹ *I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,* ¹² *while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”* ¹³ *And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed at that very moment.*

In Jewish thought, the Messianic banquet was a fundamentally Jewish event.

Sure, there would be some Gentile converts –
and wicked Jews would be “cast out” –
but the banquet was a Jewish banquet.

Jesus says that “many will come from east and west
and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.”
Some undoubtedly thought that “from east and west” simply meant the Jewish diaspora –
the many Jews who were scattered all over the world –
but the following line makes clear that Jesus means something more:

“while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness.”

You don’t describe “wicked Jews” as “sons of the kingdom”!
Jesus is saying that there will be some ‘insiders’ who don’t make it.
The Pharisees and scribes –
those who are more concerned with outward forms
than with true righteousness –
think back to the Sermon on the Mount:

in 7:21, Jesus said,
“Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord,
will enter the kingdom of heaven.” (7:21)

Now Jesus demonstrates what this means.
The leper called him “Lord” – and Jesus cleansed him.
The centurion calls him “Lord” – and Jesus healed his servant.

These two not only called Jesus “Lord,”
they also believed him – and did what he said!

But it’s not enough simply to call Jesus “Lord” –

you have to do what he says!

Jesus urges us to come to him in faith –
trusting that if Jesus says the word, then it will happen!

Some people have used this to say that if we are sick,
the reason why we are not healed is because we lack faith.

But that's *not* what happens here.

The centurion does not say, “if I have enough faith, then my servant will be healed.”

Rather, the centurion says:

“only say the word, and my servant will be healed.” (v8)

The centurion understands that *everything* hinges on the *word* of Jesus.

If you are sick, and you pray, and you are not healed,
the reason is not a “lack of faith” on your part;
the reason is because Jesus did not “say the word.”

Paul once wanted to be healed.

Jesus answered him, saying *no*,

“my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

(2 Corinthians 12:9)

Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness – his way of doing things –
his way of organizing his community –
and all these things will be added to you.

3. Fulfilling the Prophets: Peter's Mother-in-Law Healed (v14-17)

¹⁴ *And when Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying sick with a fever.* ¹⁵ *He touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she rose and began to serve him.*

I should just note that Peter had a mother-in-law.

This means that he was married.

And Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:5 that Peter (like the other apostles)

often traveled with his wife –

so the Roman practice of enforced clerical celibacy is contrary to the scriptures.

Now, in one sense, this third miracle is the most mundane in the group.

The cleansing of the leper makes a clear statement about Christ's relationship to the law.

The healing of the centurion's servant points toward the ingathering of the Gentiles.

The gospel is proclaimed everywhere to everyone – it is true!

And everywhere to everyone includes your mother-in-law.

It includes the people who are closest to you.

So the healing of Peter's mother-in-law has no majestic theological point –
and yet Matthew uses it to introduce the most important point in the gospel! (note v17)

¹⁶ *That evening they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons, and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick.* ¹⁷ *This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.”*

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that he had come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets.
This is how Jesus fulfills what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah.

“He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.”
Now, that's a curious way to speak of “fulfillment.”
Usually, we think of the cross as the place where Jesus took our illnesses.

But Matthew tells us that the healing of Peter's mother-in-law
(together with casting out demons and healing the sick in general)
fulfilled what Isaiah had said:
“He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.”

It's fitting that we talk about this on Palm Sunday –
as we think about Good Friday and Easter –
because the whole life of Jesus was a life of bearing the cross.

As he cast out demons he declared his *authority*, it is true –
but he also shared our nature – our infirmities – our weaknesses.

The demons that inflict suffering on us – he bore.
The illnesses that lay us low – he carried.

Jesus did not blithely walk through life ignorant of all our suffering.
He met us in the midst of our suffering.
And he took our suffering upon himself *in his life* – AND in his death!

He became all that we are by nature, so that we might become all that he is by grace.
That happened *first* in his incarnation – and in his life here on earth.
And only because he took our illnesses and bore our diseases in his life
was he able to deal once-for-all with them on the cross!

4. “Do Not Be Anxious About Your Life”: What Does It Mean to Follow Jesus? (v18-22)

In the same way that v17 summarizes what Jesus was doing in his healing and cast out demons,
v18 suggests a transition:

¹⁸ *Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side.*

Jesus is leaving town.

What will you do?

¹⁹ And a scribe came up and said to him, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." ²⁰ And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." ²¹ Another of the disciples said to him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." ²² And Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead."

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said "Do not worry about what you will eat" or drink or wear.

Here Jesus demonstrates that this is how he himself lives.

If you follow me, you are trading in a life of comfort and security

for a life of uncertainty.

Following Jesus *will* mean sacrificing your comfort, your agenda, your way of doing things.

You can't just *call* him Lord,

you have to do what he says!

When Elijah called Elisha, Elisha had requested permission to go back and say goodbye.

Elijah permitted that (1 Kings 19:19-21).

But now Jesus says, No.

"Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead."

Jesus is leaving town.

What are you going to do?

Mike Brey, the Notre Dame basketball coach, gave us a picture of what this looks like.

His mother died the morning of Notre Dame's game against Butler.

He knew that there would be a time to grieve –

but first, he had to coach his team.

So he didn't tell anyone about his mother's death until after the game.

I'm not interested in second-guessing his priorities –

or what this says about American culture!

The point is simply that Mike Brey put aside his grief in order to focus on something else.

Jesus is saying is that following him requires absolute and unconditional allegiance.

In ancient Judaism there are few things higher than burying your father.

The priests were not allowed to touch dead bodies –

except for the closest relatives

(father, mother, son, daughter, brother, or virgin sister).

The high priest could not touch the dead body

even of his father or mother (Lev 21).

So Jesus is saying that his disciples must be entirely and wholly committed to him.

So, do you want to be a disciple of Jesus?

No, seriously.

Are you sure that you want to be a disciple of Jesus?
It's not easy.

So many people will say, "Of course I believe in Jesus!"
What about when he tells you to leave everything behind and follow him?
Jesus is leaving town.
What are you going to do?

5. "O You of Little Faith": The Seas Stilled (v23-27)

²³ *And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him.* ²⁴ *And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep.* ²⁵ *And they went and woke him, saying, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing."* ²⁶ *And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?" Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm.* ²⁷ *And the men marveled, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?"*

You should hear echoes of the story of Jonah.

Jonah was asleep in a boat in the midst of a storm that was all about him!
And Jonah prayed to the LORD, declaring that "Salvation is from the LORD."
The disciples now say, "Save us, Lord."

I doubt that *they* were thinking deep theological thoughts at the time –
but they said the right thing to the right man at the right time!

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus assured his disciples that God would provide:
if God clothes the grass of the field, "will he not much more clothe you,
O you of little faith?"

Here, Jesus shows that this is true not only for the mundane matters of food and clothing,
but even the matters of life and death!

What sort of man is this?

In the Sermon on the Mount, people recognized that
"he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes."
Jesus did not say, "Thus saith the LORD."
He said, "I say to you!"

Jesus spoke to Israel in ways that only Israel's God could speak.
And now, Jesus is doing things that only Israel's God could do!

What do we need to hear?

I like Stanley Hauerwas's comment:

"Like the disciples it is necessary for the church to recognize that we too are of little faith.

The church, like the disciples' boat, is the ark of safety in a storm-tossed sea.

Our temptation is to try to row to shore to escape the storm,

but when we do so we fail to witness to the one who is peace.

The church's safety comes through the confession of our sinfulness,
which is nowhere more apparent

than our refusal to live in accordance with who this man, Jesus, says he is.
It is only through the confession of sin that the church becomes for the world
what the world cannot be for itself.
Even to discover how little our faith may be
requires the willingness to follow Jesus as he confronts the demons.” (97)

Because while the disciples are still struggling with “who is this man”?
the demons understand exactly who he is!
“What have you to do with us, O Son of God?”
They see Jesus for who he is!
And they understand that the Son of God has come to destroy them!

6. Pearls or Demons: What Should You Throw to Pigs? (v28-34)

²⁸ *And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, ^[e] two demon-possessed^[f] men met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way. ²⁹ And behold, they cried out, “What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?” ³⁰ Now a herd of many pigs was feeding at some distance from them. ³¹ And the demons begged him, saying, “If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs.” ³² And he said to them, “Go.” So they came out and went into the pigs, and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the waters. ³³ The herdsmen fled, and going into the city they told everything, especially what had happened to the demon-possessed men. ³⁴ And behold, all the city came out to meet Jesus, and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their region.*

This is a Gentile region (that’s why they have pigs!).
What is Jesus doing here?

Remember what Jesus said?
“Follow me.”
I’m sure that his disciples were wondering – what are we doing here?
Jesus is going to show them!

Remember that according to Leviticus pigs are *unclean* animals.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned us not to “throw your pearls before pigs.”
The verb there means to “throw” or “cast.”
Here, the same root verb is used as Jesus “throws out” or “casts out” the demons
into the herd of pigs!

You don’t throw pearls to swine – you throw demons!

Now, I know, many of you are thinking of all the bacon that sank in the sea!

But I want you to think about the contrast:
a few moments ago, the disciples nearly drowned in the sea.

Now, in the very next story, a herd of unclean animals is drowned –
together with the very demonic powers that would seek to destroy Jesus and his disciples!

Jesus has come here to render judgment on the demonic powers that have deceived the nations.
But unlike the centurion earlier in our passage,
these Gentiles don't get it.
The Gadarenes beg Jesus to leave.

And he does.

Yes, he judged the demons –
but the time has not yet come to judge the nations,
and for that matter, the time has not yet come to preach the gospel to the nations.

We'll come back to this next week –
but notice that in chapter 9, verse 1,
the next thing Jesus does is get back in the boat and go back to Nazareth.

In other words, casting demons out of Gentiles into pigs was the only thing he did.
Saving his disciples from the sea – and casting demons into the sea –
was the sole purpose of why he said “follow me” on that trip.

You can almost hear the disciples asking:
“We risked our lives on the Sea of Galilee for that?”

Only in the light of Easter Sunday does this make sense.
And in the same way, you may be wondering why is God doing this in my life?
Only in the resurrection will it all make sense.
But the same man who ordered the winds and the waves to “Be still,”
is the one who hung helplessly on the cross.

Where are we in this story?
We are the Gadarene demoniacs –
Gentiles who were suddenly set free from their demons.
But our country men don't understand – and they want Jesus to leave.
Jesus is leaving.

What will you do?

Our closing hymn calls us to answer that by walking “By Faith” and not by sight.
[Note that the chorus is sung only after stanzas 2, 4, and 5]

"To the eyes of faith, the Supper is a sign of the heavenly banquet, and through faith, those who participate in the sacred meal receive a foretaste of the heavenly reality. The bread and the wine of Communion are a spiritual food which nourishes us unto eternal life." (John Knox – cited by Glen Clary)