

There is no other Sunday that is paradoxical in the way that Palm Sunday is. We celebrate with the crowds who welcomed Jesus as anointed king, because he is; at the same time we know what they do not, which is that his kingship is not what they think it will be. We also anticipate with dread his impending ordeal and death, organically developing out of this triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Today is a day of double consciousness.

The Passion, which we will mark on Thursday with a commemoration of his last supper with his disciples, and which is also traditionally marked on Good Friday with a three-hour vigil from crucifixion to death, this Passion occurs *because of* Jesus' faithfulness to his identity as messiah. And it occurs because people both misunderstood and understood very well what that identity was.

There's a concept in Daoism called *wu wei*, which is translated as "action without effort". Wu wei is the best way to travel through life. Rather than straining and forcing yourself forward, you must align yourself with the existing flow of energy and allow it to carry you. Rather than rowing your boat, for instance, which is such hard work that they've even made it into a competitive sport, you should rig a sail to catch the wind, and then tack skillfully to the place you intend to go. Wu wei relies on the power of energy that is already flowing, like the river in Peter Mayer's song. "God is the river, swimmer, so let go." And like water in a river, the energy of the universe often looks humble and ordinary, but its power is constant, unceasing, ultimately unbeatable.

This is what I see in the trajectory of Jesus' life, and especially at this /inflection/ point of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. All along, he has been

faithful to the deepest truth he knows, expressing in his message and in his behavior that God's shalom, God's love, God's reign, is the power behind the universe, and that abuse or distortion of people's own nature and relationships is incompatible with God's reign. All along, in a way, Jesus has simply been riding the current of God's reign, making visible the reality that the way things *should* be is what you get when the hungry are fed, the outcast brought in, the wounded healed.

One writer says of wu wei,

As we come into alignment with the natural world, we are reminded of the generosity that comes when living systems are in harmony with themselves and each other. A single seed produces fruit which feeds many and gives forth a thousand more seeds. The sun gives everything that it has without being drained. A river gives life each step and turn of the way as it follows its calling from mountain to the sea. One of our most natural expressions of flow we experience in life is to give freely to each other. When we allow ourselves to follow our spontaneous callings to give – even in small ways – we bring ourselves into alignment with the generous nature of life and (without trying or looking for it) open ourselves to receive in ways that we could not have imagined. <https://brewminate.com/wu-wei-the-ancient-art-of-non-doing/>

This is a description of the nature of the power we name as God's reign.

All through the gospel of Matthew, the author is concerned to remind us that Jesus is the anointed king, the messiah, of Israel. But with a difference. So in his genealogy, Matthew makes sure to trace Jesus back to Father Abraham, but he also includes some unconventional women in the genealogy—Tamar the wronged widow who tricked her father-in-law into doing right by her, and Ruth the Moabite woman who shouldn't have been but was the grandfather of King David. They serve as not-too-subtle reminders that God had turned the world on its head more than once; this time will be no different.

In today's reading, Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey *and* a colt. This is

a reference to Zechariah 9:9: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Scholars have often laughed at silly Matthew who didn’t recognize the convention of parallelism in Hebrew poetry, in which the colt is simply a repetition of the donkey. But others have said no, this is Matthew doubling down on the prophecy, making sure *nobody* misses the point, which is that Jesus is that king. Indeed, King Solomon rode on his father’s mule to his anointing and coronation; he didn’t ride a horse.

But wait, there’s more. Horses were ridden to battle. They were not used for agriculture or ordinary transportation. And the next verse of Zechariah says, “He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations.” Jesus is riding into Jerusalem on a donkey because he is a king *and* he is not conquering by force but by *wu wei*, the power of God’s shalom. The question is not *whether* Jesus is king; the question is how he will exercise his power, a non-coercive power.

So we get to see that in the next scene, in which Jesus cleanses the Temple. Every one of the four evangelists tells this story a little differently. Mark couples it with the cursing of a fig tree, so there is a gathering sense of condemnation and darkness. Luke has Jesus clear out the Temple so that he can teach there. He can correct what’s been going on wrong. In John, the cleansing of the Temple is a foreshadowing of the destruction and resurrection of Jesus’ own body. But in Matthew, Jesus disrupts the normal activity in the Temple, which is the facilitation of sacrifice, and he transforms the Temple into a place of healing. “The blind and the

lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them.” The power that Jesus brings is the power to heal, the power to make the wounded whole, and to unleash the power that is within them as well.

What happens, of course, and the tragedy of this day is, that people want a messiah who wields the regular garden-variety kind of power. They don’t want transformation; they don’t want to die to their old selves and learn to ride the wave of wu wei. They want someone to do some coercive work on their behalf—to take over Pilate’s system so that they’re the beneficiaries and someone else suffers. They don’t want a messiah who *replaces* Pilate’s system with one in which everyone belongs and gentleness is the /order of the day/. When it becomes clear that Jesus has not brought in a conquering army and is not going to force his way to the governor’s palace, the crowd turns on him in disappointment and contempt. They cannot imagine another kind of kingship than the kind they’ve always lived with.

We know this story, and we know that Jesus goes to his death without resistance, never fighting against the current. As he lived, he dies, his deepest fidelity being to the conviction that God prevails without coercion, without violating the object. And we also know that the fundamental energy behind the universe, the fundamental principle of wu wei, is resurrection. So when Jesus dies, that won’t be the end of the story. We won’t go there now; it’s important to let today be Palm Sunday and not Easter. But I’m saying this because what happens today is entirely consistent with what happens next Sunday. Nothing changes. Only we are given double consciousness, the consciousness of a happy and excited crowd, anticipating a messiah who will deliver us from oppression—and the consciousness that we had

it all wrong, that whatever kind of king this Jesus was, it wasn't the sword-wielding knight on a white horse kind that we wanted, and we're not entirely sure we like this kind.

The challenge of Palm Sunday is that we must abandon our hopes of being rescued and having our enemies vanquished, which in my case I must say my enemies richly deserve. The gift of Palm Sunday is that it presents us with a paradox that will ultimately break open our heads and our hearts, transforming us from victims or oppressors into self-giving sisters and brothers, learning to ride the wave of God's Way in perfect love.

Blessed Jesus, ride into our city today, into the ruined places, into hearts broken and afraid, come into the midst of all that has changed, assure us that you will be with us, even to the end of the age. Amen.