

— *I Come to Jerusalem!* —

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

“Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches

from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name
of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?”
(Matthew 21:1–10)

I Come to Jerusalem

I come not to destroy the law
I come to fulfill the scriptures
To proclaim the acceptable day of the Lord.

I have come to free the captives
To feed the hungry, clothe the naked
I have come to bring long-delayed justice to the poor.

I come to Jerusalem
He comes to Jerusalem
Go tell the daughter of Zion
Look, your king is coming to you
Humble, mounted as foretold,
Upon a colt—a donkey’s foal.

Hosanna to the King,
Hosanna to the House of David
Hail the Messiah
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah

O my Jerusalem, I weep for thee
City that kills the prophets
and stones the messengers of our God.

Hosanna to the King,
Hosanna to the House of David
Hail the Messiah
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah

Even rocks and stones shall sing Hosanna to the King

I come to Jerusalem!

Becca

I learned in seminary that there are five kinds of prayer: lament, praise, adoration, intercession, and confession. I also learned that all five of those forms of prayers can be found throughout the one hundred fifty Psalms. Each psalm can be divided into one of those themes and it is a way of seeing the whole range of emotions the psalmists experienced. Sometimes they were writing

from the mountaintop and experiencing God in the holy dwelling place. Sometimes they were in the valley feeling the loss of love. Other times they were in the fields teaching the wisdom of the ages to the next generation. Marcus's composition based on Jesus's entry into Jerusalem reminds me that those five types of prayers can also be found bundled together in one event. That we can wail as lamenters over the state of violence, injustice, and cruelty at the same time we are singing in adoration over the sunrise. We can praise God in worship with hands held high while we plead for mercy on behalf of a sister who is suffering. We can beat our chests and beg for mercy as we weep, grateful that we feel Love so close. All of those prayers live together in our hearts and when we allow ourselves the gift of faith, they come out together in words and deeds and even songs. We feel it all. We rejoice, we grieve, we hope. Faith cannot always be dissected into five distinct parts. It's a living entity that imbues our experiences with a multitude of feelings.

The passages in Matthew record the humble and glorious entry into Jerusalem and hold those prayers in perfect tension. Jesus explains his instructions for how it will unfold at the beginning of the twenty-first chapter. He is fulfilling an old prophecy and instructing his disciples on how to carry it out. Marcus's melodies and orchestration add drama and power to the spoken word. The music helps conjure up for me the vision of how costly and lonely it can be to live into our truth. The disciples knew the cost of entering Jerusalem and what was coming. The occupied nation was one that killed its prophets and shut down rebellions. They must have felt both great anticipation and fear at the

same time. They were participating in watching Jesus begin that humble journey on a donkey that would usher in the events that would lead to his violent murder. But along with those divergent feelings was this overwhelming joy and adoration as the crowd sings “Hosanna in the highest” and lays down the branches. The Scriptures record that the whole city was in turmoil, so the praise must have been almost at a frenzied level. The entry into Jerusalem is filled with layers and layers of feelings and it is only in song that such depth and breadth of emotions can be expressed. We wail and sing, lay branches and raise our arms as we feel the adoration and longing that live within all of us.

Beyond that, the music invites us to contemplate how we are living into our truth. In other words, where are we in this passage? Are we laying down branches we have cut and joining the crowds? Are we singing praise in the streets for all the mercy we have known? Are we ready to stake our lives for the sake of truth as well? Do we even know what we believe or what we would sing? We are called through the Passion narrative to ask the question again, “Who is this man?” Such a question is central to our lives of faith and how we will live into our faith. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and received a king’s welcome. He was a force that inspired men and women to lay down their lives. It was a radical act that leaves us—no matter how many times we have heard the story—wondering again, “Who is this man?” How can we worship him with our whole hearts?

Jesus has been making his way to Jerusalem for three years. His whole ministry happened as he and his friends made their way to the Holy City. It begins after his baptism by John and

his retreat to the wilderness. There he learns about his strengths and temptations. There he wrestles with the beasts and is tended by angels. In the wilderness he begins his journey to Jerusalem. What could have been a two-week trek for him and his disciples took him his whole life as a rabbi to make. He was sidetracked by the suffering he encountered “on the way.” He was delayed by the needs of a community that entreated him. He was backtracking for friends who were ill and imprisoned. Along the way he is teaching and preaching about the acts of mercy required and what to expect when he gets to the gates of Jerusalem. It’s a journey that prepares the community and the disciples’ hearts for what love requires. He teaches the disciples that healing is possible, and then he keeps walking toward the city that will kill him. It is a beautifully sad and dramatic story of what love looks like in flesh and bone.



The question this music and the passage ask us to reflect upon is simply: How close to Jerusalem are we? Are we ready to lay down our cloaks, to be at a place where the rocks and stones shout “Hosanna,” and to answer the questions about whose we are? Are we still near Galilee on a hillside eating a piece of bread from a basket and trying to figure out where it came from? Are we at a place as communities of faith and individuals to risk more so that we are proclaiming the gospel in a way that is worthy of the Passion? The Passion is the climax of the story and the journey to Jerusalem doesn’t make sense without it. Without the Passion,

the journey through the wilderness loses both its tenderness and depth.

It is a gift to wander in the wilderness and explore our faith. That is a necessary part of the journey. To contemplate in silence, always ready to listen to new ideas is a great way to be a student of faith. But faith also requires action of us. Faith asks us to take a stance and be on the side of love. There comes a time when we have to enter the gates and to be ready to sing “Hosanna in the highest” and lay down our branches and say, “Yes, Lord, we believe.”

For me, the transition from the wilderness to Jerusalem happens as Jesus weeps in the garden. Those tears feel like they were formed in him during his whole three years in the wilderness and through the cities. They were forming as he encountered the suffering of the people he came to serve and in the face of the injustices he had to confront. Even though he was strong when John was killed or when the women anointed him with oil, the tears must have been there. Those tears are also an expression of the longing he feels for what we could be and what the kingdom could look like. It doesn't have to be a world that kills its prophets or rejects its children. When Jesus weeps over the city before he enters, it feels like one of the most intimate and honest moments of the Gospels. The tears offer us a glimpse into the heart of God. As a pastor, I see over and over how grief puts us on the hard and holy ground where we are asked to dig deeper into our faith and find out what we really believe. It is where our faith is not tested, but fired like iron and made strong.

We are called to remember that in the life of faith, it's not just the journey; it is the destination. We are heading to Jerusalem, where we will weep and praise and adore and lament. We will be asked, "Do you know him?" "Did you see him in the homeless person you passed by today?" "Did you see him in the widow's offering?" In the Passion, the destination is close by. We feel the tears closer and the need to sing praise. The Passion is at the heart of our faith and as we reenact it every year, it is an invitation to remember our destination. It is not just a beautiful piece of music, a historical reenactment; it is a calling to remember our own destination.

This morning I went outside and felt the sunrise like warm wine on the back of my throat. I saw two beautiful rabbits feasting in Marcus and my overgrown yard where clover is abundant. I felt a cool breeze kiss my cheek in the midst of a hot summer morning. I felt the space rising in my soul to sing praise to our Lord and to birth new ideas. Time was as expansive as the sky. This morning I could have been at the gates of Jerusalem. I could easily have laid down my cloak in gratitude and sung, "Alleluia! Praise God from whom all blessings flow." I could have kissed Jesus's feet and waved a palm branch.

Aaah, but not yesterday—yesterday there was another mass shooting in America, there was relapse after nine long months by a woman I have been working with, who has survived rape and being shot by her pimp, and there was a storm that hid the sunrise. Yesterday I felt anxiety about death and had to visit three people sick in the hospital. Yesterday one of our almost-adult children had a party to watch a sports event and I felt suspicious.

Yesterday Marcus was visiting his parents who are nearing their own deaths. Yesterday was hard. What I need to learn on those days is that there, too, I am close to the gates of Jerusalem. There, too, I can sing “Alleluia” even as I weep.

So how close to Jerusalem are we? My bet is that we are closer than we think. The wilderness is not that far from the gates. The distance between here and there is a walk. The space between wandering and coming home is smaller than our fears lead us to believe. The difference between being a spectator and participant is as small as a bended knee. The pilgrims are closer to the heart of God than they know. To be close to Jerusalem—a metaphor for coming to the heart of our faith—means three things:

We are prepared to surrender control for love’s sake.

We are prepared to speak our truth.

We are prepared to confront powers and principalities with that truth and love.

These are huge idealistic steps that we practice taking, even as we are sitting outside the gates. They are steps that help us discern where we are and what we need to let go to pass through those gates. In Marcus’s *Passion*, we can feel the drama rising as Jesus prepares for all three consequences of being close to Jerusalem. We put ourselves into the midst of that drama and find out where we are in the story so that it takes on new life in us.



For reflection, reread the first ten verses of the twenty-first chapter of Matthew and consider the following questions for the beginning of the Passion narrative.

Given that this first part of the Passion places us right at the gates of Jerusalem, and those gates represent the transition from wilderness to Jerusalem:

- How has your faith community prepared you to be at the gates of Jerusalem?
- How has your faith community prepared itself to be at the gates of Jerusalem?
- How has your faith community prepared the wider world to be at the gates of Jerusalem?

Marcus

As I consider the journey of writing this cantata, I am reminded of the words attributed to Martin Mull: “Writing about music is like dancing about architecture.”

Like most folks who call themselves Christians, I do not consider myself a theologian. Until writing this cantata, I had never done a serious study of the passion of Christ; I felt I knew the story. I imagine that most church-going Christians don't have, or don't take, the time to really dig into the various Gospel accounts of the end of Jesus's life. In composing *The Passion*, I chose to create five musical segments for soloists, choir, and piano (and percussive hand-clapping). The five segments reflect Jesus's final days in Jerusalem: his entrance into the Holy City, his last meal with his disciples and final teachings, his arrest on the Mount of Olives, his trials, and his crucifixion. I chose to precede each of the five musical offerings with a reading from

one of the Gospels corresponding to the events musicalized, and found myself using different Gospel accounts from one piece to the next; that is, unlike other composers, I didn't limit myself to one Gospel (e.g., Bach's *Passion According to Matthew*). In fact, with the readings and with the libretto itself, I moved from one Gospel to another, picking and choosing my favorite passages, and sprinkling in Hebrew Bible texts where they either emerged as part of the Gospel accounts, or where they seemed to surface from my own consciousness: a limited, yet not empty reservoir of biblical passages. It seemed an authentic way to approach this creative process; I think this is how many of us read the Bible today.

Also, I realized that, despite my assertion that most of us are not theologians, when it came time to choose passages for the musical libretto, it is actually the case that all of us who call ourselves Christians are at least armchair theologians. Choices have to be made.

In the first piece, "I Come to Jerusalem," I found myself especially appreciating Matthew's account of Jesus's entrance into the Holy City. Like the crowd, I found myself wondering aloud: "Who is this?"²

"Who is this man?" felt like the overriding theme of the moment. Jesus comes to Jerusalem, on this most holy of occasions, to celebrate Passover with his disciples, to preach and to heal. There would have been a large ragtag crowd of followers at

2. Matthew 21:10

his side. Word of mouth about the healings and miracles would have been spreading for some time, along with the growing claims of the coming of a Messiah as promised by the prophets.

Jesus enters humbly, on a colt and not a war horse, and Matthew tells us that this was foretold by the prophet Zechariah:

O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9)

I begin the cantata with Jesus's voice alone, proclaiming his vision. His opening a capella pronouncement is a series of quotes combined to form a proclamation, beginning with the words of Matthew 5:17: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

Jesus has made a point to enter Jerusalem humbly, yet certainly he can hear the shouts of "Hosanna" and "Son of David." He would have known that many in the throngs surrounding him would be expecting a worldly king, a warlord, someone who might free them after years of tyrannical occupation at the hands of Rome. It must have been a wondrous sight!

The joyous harmonies, counterpoint work, and the use of the text from Isaiah are meant to evoke the excitement and cacophony of Jesus's entrance through the gates. It is meant to arouse in the listener the joy of the moment.

And then I found myself moving to Luke's account.

Luke tells us Jesus was still for a moment, as emotions overcame him:

“As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it.”³

Luke gives us clues into Jesus’s life and heart, but it is a profound image that defies simple explanation. I imagine Jesus is contemplating the violent past of the Holy City, as well as the probable violence ahead; that his coming to Jerusalem will almost certainly end in his torture and death. I like to think that his weeping is a sign of tenderness for humanity’s brokenness and folly. Perhaps it is also a foreshadowing of words Jesus will speak, forgiving his tormentors on the cross.

“Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”⁴

The truth is, we don’t know what Jesus was thinking. I’ve learned in my years as a performing songwriter that sometimes the power of an image is the way that it can transform, change, evolve, live, and take on different shapes in the human heart.

Years ago I wrote a song with Martie McGuire of the Dixie Chicks called “Cowboy Take Me Away.” She wanted to write a song for her sister’s wedding, and her sister was marrying a cowboy: a country singer who had a ranch and broke horses. Martie had the title and the beginning of an arpeggio on mandolin. I had the start of a lyric about freedom, and returning to simplicity and nature.

I want to touch the earth

I want to break it in my hands

I want to grow something wild, and unruly.

3. Luke 19:41

4. Luke 23:34

We found our two paths toward the song, met in a beautiful place, and we finished the song in a matter of minutes. Martie and Natalie sang it for Emily at her wedding with Charlie. Later, it was chosen to be the second single on the Chick's top-selling album *Fly* and became a hit on country radio.

Consequently, over the next few years I found myself playing the song at festivals and songwriter nights. At one such night I was part of a fundraiser held at The Bluebird Café in support of cancer research St. Jude Children's Hospital. There were several patients and survivors with their parents, and as I played the song I could feel many reactions to it. There were tears on several faces, especially the face of a little girl sitting near me as I performed. When the show was over, this little girl with a scarf covering her head came up to me and said, "Cowboy Take Me Away' is my favorite song and the Dixie Chicks are my favorite group!"

"I love the Chicks as well!" I agreed.

She continued, "I was wondering about something. The words in the chorus say:

Cowboy take me away,
Fly this girl as high as you can into the wild blue
Set me free, O, I pray,
Closer to heaven above, and closer to you
Closer to you.

"What I was wondering is the 'cowboy' in the song, is that God? Did you mean that the cowboy is really God?"

I thought about how Martie and I had come at the song from different vantage points and that the central image of the

song probably had very different meanings for each of us. I took a breath and told the young girl that her vision of our song was as beautiful as the song itself, if not more beautiful. And yes, the “cowboy” in the song was, indeed, God.

So given the power of Luke’s image of Jesus stopping the procession to rest quietly with his own thoughts and weep, I decided to create a musical break in the movement, taking the piece out of tempo, and changing the time signature, creating a moment where Jesus sings what might be described as a soliloquy, or an “aside” to the listener. He steps away from the crowd and offers us an intimate insight into his interior world.

“O my Jerusalem, I weep for thee . . .”

Musically, however, we cannot stop; the moment passes, and Jesus moves forward through the gates of holy Jerusalem. For a moment, all is right in the world. The four-part harmonies return, ushering Jesus into the city and then seem to multiply with the addition of hand clapping and Jesus’s voice hovering above! The Messiah has indeed come, “gentle, riding on a donkey” as foretold. We hear the cries of “Hosanna to the King,” and “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” Jesus steps into the vortex of this Passover, surrounded by the hopes and dreams of freedom. He is also surrounded by those who feel threatened by his vision, his proclamation of love and justice, and the power and the authority that must have accompanied the sound of his voice.

“I come to Jerusalem!”

