The crowd is stirred up. Someone’s coming. People push and shove in order to catch a glance. Somebody special is making a way into the city. The crowd moves like a river; people flow out of the city to line the road. They spread their cloaks on the ground; they cut fresh palm branches, with some they wave and with some they line the path. Together the crowd shouts the words from the ancient psalm, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Psalm 118).

Latecomers who join the gathering crowd ask, “Who is this?” Those around them answer, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.” Who is this: a teacher, a prophet, a son of the Davidic line, a Messiah, a promised King? They hear the answer, but little do they know what it means. There is no way the people can know what is coming or how the week will end, but Jesus knows. This week, which begins with a parade into the city, will end with a procession to Calvary.

The whole ministry of Jesus has been moving toward this moment. What has been hidden will be revealed; what has been only partially understood will be brought into the light. When Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem on a donkey he proclaims his true identity - not with words but with symbolic action. The prophet Zechariah said that the messianic king would come to Jerusalem on “a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The symbolic act portrays the character of his kingship. According to tradition, a king rides a horse in a time of war, but a donkey in a time of peace. Little do they know the cost of peace.

There is one small, almost overlooked word that helps us see the significance of this moment. Matthew tells us that the whole city is in turmoil wondering who this could be. Other versions render Matthew’s expression as the city was moved or stirred. Matthew uses the same word to describe the earthquake at the crucifixion when God tears the temple curtain from top to bottom and the earth quakes and the rocks crack open. He uses the word to describe the quaking of the guards who fall down as if dead at the tomb of Jesus on Easter morning.

To say the city is simply stirred up or is moved does not capture the depth of Matthew’s intention. Something more is going on here than simply shaking our heads in disbelief after reading the headlines over coffee at Starbucks. Something more is happening here than being excited by the North Carolina Tar Heels’ winning the men’s tournament and the South Carolina Gamecocks winning the women’s championship. (I had to get that in!). It is more than being overcome with emotion by the kindness of a friend, or an acceptance letter from the college of your dreams, or the sight of a family member after years of absence. No, the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem rocks our lives and shakes our world to the core. Jesus cracks open the city like a great earthquake. He begins a procession that leads from triumph to defeat and from defeat back to triumph. He moves from life to death and to life again. He begins the final battle for our salvation and our freedom to live a new life in God.

I wonder if we have bridled the power of this scene so that it no longer speaks to us of the things that matter - like faith and courage, vision and commitment, death and life. The city’s question is put to us: “Who is this?” It is for us to decide for or against the answer buzzing through the crowds, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.” In these few verses Jesus is called “Lord,” “Prophet” and “Son of David.” He is hailed as the Savior of the people. He shakes the city to its foundations. As Patrick Wilson has noted, “Jesus collides with all that stands against God’s agenda in history, both the public history of nations and the private history of individuals” (p.33, Lectionary Homiletics, March 1996). Jesus is at the beginning of time; he will be at the end of time; even now he stands at the center of history.

In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God fulfills the promise spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

“The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people... I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more” (Jeremiah 31:31-34).
Unlike the old covenant with Moses, this covenant is not written on tablets of stone, but on the human heart. In the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, God wipes away our sin and robs death of its power. In Jesus, God makes an unbreakable covenant with us. It is God's work and not our own. God sends the Holy Spirit to be the sign and seal of the covenant within our hearts. As Paul writes in Galatians, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (2:20). This week is not only about the death and resurrection of Jesus, it is also about our death and resurrection.

What happens this week not only shatters the city of Jerusalem, it also upends our lives and calls into question everything we were so sure we knew to be true: we have to look out for ourselves because it is a dog eat dog world; when we see young children gassed to death, we shrug our shoulders because we feel powerless before evil, violence, famine and war; we believe that we have done things that are beyond forgiveness; we give up on hope because we no longer believe that we will ever see any lasting change in our lives.

I am not sure we want to have our lives shaken to the core. We have gone along with the ways things are for so long, that I am not sure we want to change our mode of operation. We accept the familiar misery we know because we are afraid of how God might upend our lives. We feel helpless.

T.S. Eliot’s play, Murder in the Cathedral, is a dramatic portrayal of the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury after his return from a seven year absence in France. Becket, who was once the close companion of the King, is now the King’s troublesome priest. In the play, the women of Canterbury serve as a kind of chorus like those in ancient Greek drama that comment upon the unfolding action and the truth that others dare not speak. They feel caught up in forces beyond their control:

There have been oppression and luxury,
There have been poverty and license,
There has been minor injustice.
Yet we have gone on living, and partly living.
Sooner or later, we come to the realization that “living and partly living” is not enough. We are tired of the carefully calculated peace treaty we have made with Jesus. We come to understand that it is not enough to give only when it feels good, worship when there is nothing better going on, pray only when something is needed or serve when there will be some return on the investment. We know that we may wear a tee shirt with a religious logo or drive a car with a license plate that reads, “In God we trust,” but that doesn’t mean that we have given serious thought to following Jesus. Jesus did not enter the city to die for our sins to make us half-hearted disciples who only give lip service to the gospel.

Throughout his life, the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard severely criticized the established church in Denmark for reducing Christianity to practices that anyone could keep with little inconvenience to themselves. He criticized the church for its accommodation to culture, its conformity to middle class values and its coziness with the state. He felt the church had abandoned the demanding and uncompromising teachings of Jesus about love. He longed for a return to an authentic, vital faith in Jesus Christ which would lead a believer to live out the hard claims of the gospel. Kierkegaard believed that there were only two ways of looking at Jesus: to believe in him and accept him or to be offended by him and reject him. Kierkegaard understood how Jesus shakes the foundations.

This week we are invited to follow Jesus into Jerusalem. So what will it be? Giving into the lie that things do not change, convincing ourselves that Jesus died for no reason, and resigning ourselves to only “partly living”? So what will it be? As he enters the city and travels to the cross, Jesus becomes the unshakable foundation of our lives. We know what lies ahead. We follow him into the city and to the cross. Yes, I can see all of us in that Palm Sunday parade. I can see us shouting, laughing, crying and rejoicing because Jesus has upended our lives, shaken us to the very core of our being, and given us a new foundation for life.