

Beast of Burden

Mark 11: 1-11

Sid Batts

First Presbyterian Church
Greensboro, North Carolina

March 25, 2018

Palm Sunday

Jerusalem was packed with people.
Jews from everywhere had come to celebrate the Passover.
Thousands had become tens of thousands.
Streets were full.
The marketplace buzzed.
Children played in every alley.
All the ingredients for high drama are there.

A mild disturbance was taking place at the city's south gate. People stopped talking to each other and turned toward the sound. It was chanting, or yelling, or maybe cheering coming from a procession of some kind. As the procession drew nearer, the chorus became clear:

“Hosanna...Hosanna”

The curious moved closer and what they saw was a man riding serenely on the back of a small donkey. Around him was the slashing and whooshing of palm branches. And some people even took off their coats and robes and spread them in the street.

In this unusual scene, people were saying:

“Hosanna.”

“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven.”

* **

It must have been a remarkable and surprising day....that first Palm Sunday. As I read the Palm Sunday story from Mark's gospel, I am surprised by many things....but none more than seeing how much time is spent on the details of a donkey. That's right....a donkey.

The Greek word describing these beasts of burden can be translated as *donkey* or *colt*. Mark uses the term *colt* but we know from the other gospels telling this same story that it was a donkey.

Listen again to part of Mark's telling:

When they were approaching Jerusalem....near the Mount of Olives, he (Jesus) sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it.

The rest of the story is about Jesus riding the donkey through the streets of Jerusalem among *Hosannas* and waving palm branches. But seven of the eleven verses describing that Palm Sunday talk about the donkey!

What is going on here?

Why is this donkey so important the story?

Why is the donkey so important for Jesus?

Why is it important to us?

Well no one could see it that day, but the way Jesus came into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey was a bold, symbolic, intentional statement saying who Jesus was. It would take the events of the forth coming week for any retrospective understanding. And it would be a week that would end not with a parade but with a bitter funeral procession and Jesus carrying his cross to a place of public execution.

But afterwards, in the days and years to follow, the early church, the followers of Jesus, began to understand. Interpreters such as Paul would articulate the meaning of the donkey parade, Jesus's death and the nature of our Christ.

Paul would say....quoting a hymn of the early church:

*though he (Jesus) was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a servant,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself,
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

Palm Sunday is a day when we hold up thoughts about Jesus that can feel opposite and contradictory. Palm Sunday has a triumphant feeling; it's a parade and a celebration. But it is also a day foreshadowing the cruelty of a flogging and crucifixion... and a day revealing once again the humility of Jesus and how Jesus mixed humility with strength.

The donkey is the symbol. The animal Jesus rides in upon is not a majestic animal that emperors, or governors, or commanders, or kings would ride in on.

No, the message is that Jesus is there to start a revolution... but it will not be a revolution of violence or political insurrection; it will be a revolution through human transformation. Humility, being a servant, is the way this transformation will occur within an army of peaceful men and women who will later call themselves Christians. A donkey is the perfect symbol, the perfect prop for Jesus to ride in on through the streets of Jerusalem.

Or think about Palm Sunday this way: It was a confident Jesus who came riding in on a symbol of humility. So this day there is a combination of purpose, strength and confidence...meshed together with a spirit of humility. This son of God, emptied himself, took on human form, took on the purposes of God, while being humiliated through trial, torture, brutality, insults and a mortifying death. It's humility combined with strength, purpose, confidence.

Now when we talk about the place of humility in our Christian life, we often miss that humility is a sign of strength...that Jesus embodies a confident humility.

So part of the Palm Sunday challenge is balancing these attitudes ...of being confident without being puffed up, of being humble without being a doormat. This is the mind of Jesus. Because humility is not about being a worm, or feeling less than. Nor is it about being better than. Humility is about equality.

Jesus was filled with humility and he was confident in his purpose. He was humble and as tough as nails. Jesus taught, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, offer him the other." That's teaching humility and strength combined. And when they spat on Jesus, insulted him, mocked him and beat him, Jesus did not use his Godly power to retaliate.

Okay, so we might agree that humility is a noble characteristic, a spiritual key, and something we would like to have more of. But how do we get it? How do we learn it? How do we *grow a spirit* of humility?

Maybe this is one of those things that can be learned but can't be taught.

So, I believe Jesus was trying to teach this humility lesson, not only in the strategic way he chose the donkey but in the two disciples he sent to retrieve the donkey.

Now Mark does not identify the two disciples by name. But I'd bet the farm that the two Jesus sent to get the donkey were James and John. You might remember that James and John were a part of a disciple three-some who formed a Jesus-inner-circle along with Peter.

Why do I think they are the ones chosen for this task? Because just earlier in Mark's gospel, James and John have been arguing over who is the greatest among them. Remember that story? These two ask Jesus if they can take center stage...to sit at his right and left in his glory. They are jockeying for position among the twelve ...looking to be elevated to a place of prominence.

Jesus, you remember, was not happy. So he gave them a lecture sermon about *the last being first*, and about the greatest among them becoming servants.

So think about this — Who would Jesus assign the mundane, lowly task of going to get the donkey...of dealing with the onlookers who'd suspect they were thieves, who'd have to wrestle with a stubborn animal? Who'd be taken down a notch by this menial task?

James and John.

The irony and the lesson to be taught would be too great for Jesus to overlook in this *teachable moment*. And the lesson Jesus teaches is subtle but profound.

Do we get it? The role of a disciple is often lived in the mundane of daily living; of dealing with the trivial things, of working in the nitty gritty details of getting things ready for Jesus to enter....not just in Jerusalem but in the lives of the world.

Which is to say, the role of a disciple is often in the simplest of things...

Listening to someone who has had a bad day;

Sending a text to someone who needs a little encouragement;

Being inconvenienced to help someone.

That's how Jesus enters into the lives of people, isn't it? In the small, loving acts that often seem mundane and insignificant. Palm Sunday is about that kind of spirit.

Two Americans, both Christians and people of means, were traveling in Southeast Asia. In one of those countries, they saw a boy hitched and pulling a crude plow through a field, while an old man held the handles and directed it. One of the Americans took a picture.

"I suppose they are very poor," one said to their guide who was also a Christian missionary.

“Yes,” was the reply of the missionary. “That is the family of Chi Noui. When the church was being built they were eager to give something to it, but they had no money; so they sold their only ox and gave their money to the church. So this spring they are pulling the plow themselves.”

The two Americans were silent for some moments. Then one of them said, “That must have been a real sacrifice.”

Replied the missionary, “They did not call it that. They thought it was fortunate that they had an ox to sell.”

That’s the spirit of Palm Sunday and the donkey is the perfect symbol.

Blessed is he who comes riding in on the back of a donkey.