

Palm Sunday

April 9, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew. (Matthew 21: 1-11)

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. 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?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

When I was a kid, in the late '60's, every year on the Fourth of July the whole family would gather at my grandma's house in east Baltimore to celebrate. We would cook out, and eat entirely too much food. We would play some pick-up baseball. And then we would all wander down her long front street to Merritt Boulevard to watch the annual community Fourth of July parade.

It was like most community Fourth of July parades. There were some local celebrities who were riding in convertibles and waving. There were a couple of local high school bands that played – loudly. And there were lots of local ball teams and dance studios all lined up, walking along, looking for Mom and Dad in the crowd.

And then there was my favorite, the baton twirlers. Back then there were whole schools of baton twirling. Do they even do that anymore? These baton twirlers would be set from the tallest teens to the youngest kids, and they would be marching along. And they would be twirling their batons up high and down low, and they would throw them up in the air. And most of them caught them. And the ones that didn't would run after them. And we would cheer for them, just because we were proud of them being there.

This was hardly a professional-style parade. It wasn't Macy's, or the Tournament of Roses. But it didn't need to be. We were all celebrating the Fourth of July, and freedom, and community, and the joy of being together. A perfect afternoon, shouting for the sheer joy of it.

I would propose that the day Jesus entered Jerusalem, it was less like a triumphant entry into the city and more like a community parade. Kind of corny, very amateur, and full of joy.

The professional parade was somewhere else. Historians tell us that during the week before Passover, Pilate would come from Caesarea with extra troops, to reinforce the city because of the crowds. Now, this was a parade. Soldiers on war-horses, and marching in precision with swords at their side, banners before them. Everything about it meant to exude power and incite fear.

Jesus' parade, on the other hand, had children running around, chanting "Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna!" Coats are flapping in the wind. Instead of swords, they are waving branches they cut off the local bushes. And instead of a war-horse, Jesus rides, not a horse, not even a mule, but a donkey, and a momma donkey at that, with her little colt prancing alongside.

A community parade: awkward, homegrown, improvised. Hardly a triumphant entry. More like an afternoon jaunt – by the savior of the world. Now, this doesn't seem like the best way to get people moved and inspired. If you want them to listen to you, if you want to change the world, do you really want to be riding a donkey?

Think about it. If you were in charge of saving the world, if you were in charge of giving people, giving all people everywhere, hope and life and a future, how would you do it? What would you do?

I suspect we all come about this with different ideas. Say, for example, some might create a great new technology that would make all modern weapons obsolete. Bombs could not fall, and guns could not kill, and war would be impossible. And people would have to find other ways to work out differences and live together in peace.

Or maybe you would create an amazing medical discovery that would cure every disease and every infirmity. There would be no sick people anywhere. No AIDS, no cancer, no broken bodies. Everyone would be healthy and strong and able to become what they were meant to be.

Or maybe you would take leadership over the whole world, and all the resources of this world would be shared. There would be no more hunger or poverty. People would be able to work and live in peace. Everyone would be honored and respected, and have a place in your new world. What do you think of that one?

Or maybe you would share all the world's knowledge and all the world's truths, and people would come to faith, and everyone would believe the same things. And there would be no more questions or doubts or disagreements. And everyone would know the best way to live.

Oh, if we were in charge of the world, what plans we would make! But this? Really? A parade? And a homegrown one at that? Not this way. This is an embarrassing way to save the world. It's small and awkward and insignificant.

But, come to think of it, God has always started with small and awkward and insignificant. God has always started with weakness and brought new and unexpected possibilities. Abraham and Sarah have a baby when they are too old. Egyptian slaves become a nation, kept alive by manna and water from a rock. Little David battled big Goliath. Uninspired Jonah preaches to the Ninevites. God takes those who are unwanted and unnoticed and makes new life possible.

So, while you and I might want to see vast, worldwide change that would make us whole and secure, and lock out any pain or death, while we would like to see the world fit our needs and desires, those ideas in the end are too small, they are too temporary.

God has a different kind of idea. God chooses the way of weakness, emptying Godself of anything we might consider greatness and power and safety and knowledge.

After riding a donkey into the city, Jesus broke bread with his betrayer, washed the feet of those who would abandon him, healed a soldier armed to arrest him, and forgives both the repentant criminal on the cross beside him and the unrepentant tormentors in front of him.

Or, as Paul wrote,

*“He humbled himself
and became obedient to the point
of death –
even death on a cross.”*

No less than the abundant, forgiving, ever-present love of God will change the world. And it doesn't look like our dreams of a perfect world. It looks like a baby in a manger. It looks like an itinerant preacher who hung out with all the wrong people and talked about loving enemies. It looks like a guy on a donkey. It looks like a man on a cross.

God is willing to be with us in this world, small and awkward and insignificant. God is willing to be with us in everything – even death. And in the great mystery that is Holy Week and Easter, God is willing to bring us new life, new possibility, and a new world.

It was a little, homegrown, insignificant parade, with coats and plants, and a momma donkey. Not at all what we would have planned. But exactly what we needed.

Amen.