

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by Rev. Gail L. Miller, Pastor

April 5, 2009 Palm Sunday

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Divinity on a Donkey

I went to college in rural Minnesota. As you enter the town the sign reads: Northfield Minnesota, cows, colleges and contentment. And we knew spring had arrived when the scent of the turkey farm would waft up the hill. We were about an hour south of Minneapolis, and a couple times a year we would make a pilgrimage to the big city for a concert or shopping. I will always remember that drive. Ten miles west on route 19, passing farm after farm. And then north on Interstate 35. And then there was the slight rise in the highway in Burnsville. As soon as you reach the top - there it is! Fifteen miles off in the distance, but clear as can be - the skyscrapers of Minneapolis rising out of the flat Minnesota plains.

Now I've never been to the Holy Land, but a minister friend of mine describes the route that Jesus and his followers would have traveled that first Palm Sunday 2000 years ago similarly. Anticipation increasing as they climb the east side of the Mount of Olives just out of sight from the city. They know that their path will lead them to a turn in the road at the crest of the mountain where suddenly a vista of the Holy City bursts into panoramic view before their eyes.

The scripture we just read in Mark is commonly called the Triumphal Entry. But as we look more closely at it this morning, we'll see that it is really is not the way Jesus arrives at Jerusalem, which makes it so triumphal, but rather the peoples' expectations of Jesus which make it so.

Mark records a lot of details as Jesus makes preparations for his entrance into Jerusalem. It's as if he knows that the whole world will remember this day, and so the details are important.

So with precision, he walks his disciples through every detail for finding the colt of a donkey, untying it, assuring the keeper that it will be properly returned, and bringing it to him as the unbroken animal that only a king would ride.

You see, the entry into Jerusalem has to be perfect in every detail - not for Jesus' sake, but for the sake of those who will critically analyze it to see if it conforms exactly to the specifics of the Old Testament prophecy in Zechariah which foretells the coming Messiah.

The Old Testament prophecy says that the Messiah will enter Jerusalem on a note of triumph. Zechariah 9:9: "lowly, and riding on a donkey, and upon a colt the foal of a donkey."

And so Jesus doesn't leave things until the last moment. He knows what he's going to do and has made arrangements ahead of time. When he sends his disciples with a password that had been

prearranged - "The Lord needs it now." This is not a spontaneous decision; rather it is something to which his whole life has been building up.

The symbol of the colt of a donkey is interesting and important. By choosing a donkey, Jesus actually predicts His role as the King who comes in peace and dignity. The people who were there when Jesus rode in to Jerusalem would certainly have known the difference between the way Jesus came riding in, and the pageantry that usually greeted Roman Emperors returning from war.

This is where the donkey is key. When a king would return from war victorious, he would ride a prancing horse at the head of a processional that included his warriors, a shackled contingent of the conquered people now prisoners, and an extravagant display of the riches that the army had taken by force. A king riding on a horse meant a victory of bloody conquest.

But if the king approaches on donkey, it means he is seeking peace. And so it is with King Jesus. He makes His entrance on a donkey - a symbol of peace, not war; a symbol of humility, not pride. And behind Him comes an entourage of twelve fishermen, called to be disciples, and a rabble of common people whom He has healed and set free. They are the trophies of His conquest - not by bloody violence, but by unconditional love.

In our day, a donkey is the butt of our jokes and the symbol of stupidity, but in the time of Jesus it was the beast of kings. So by choosing the foal of a donkey, Jesus gives us the symbol for His future. He comes in peace, not war; and He conquers by His Spirit, not by might nor power. For those who want to see Christianity represented by a leader on a prancing horse at the head of a conquering army showing off its trophies, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is a big disappointment.

And so as he arrives at the city, the disciples throw their coats on the donkey as a makeshift saddle and the processional moves to the gate of entry. Instinct leads the people to break forth with a natural response to the entry of a king - coats are thrown in His path, palm leaves are plucked and waved, and an impromptu choir begins its antiphonal chant:

Hosanna!

Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the kingdom of our father David

That comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest!

All of it really out of place when you think about it. We see a crowd of people thinking of kingship in the terms of conquest spreading their garments on the ground before him, exactly what you do when a king arrives. But clearly, they misunderstand.

And the words which the crowd shouts to Jesus further show their misunderstanding of the situation. They sang from the Psalms - Psalm 118, verse 26 to be exact. Here's the story behind this Psalm.

In 167 B.C. there was an extraordinary king in Syria. He believed it was his duty to be a missionary of Greek ways of life. So wherever he could, he tried to introduce Greek thought, Greek practices, Greek religions into other cultures, even using force if necessary. And he tried to do this in Palestine as well.

For a while he conquered Palestine, and tried to eliminate the Jewish religion and culture. He desecrated the Temple, and made carrying the Torah a crime you could be killed for. He actually instituted the worship of the Greek god Zeus where Yahweh had been worshiped. He made the chambers around the Temple courts into brothels. He did everything he could to wipe out the Jewish faith.

Then another man came to power (Judas Maccabaeus) and after an amazing career of conquest, he drove this Syrian king out in 163 B.C. He then repurified and reconsecrated the temple. This is the event which our Jewish friends celebrate as Hanukkah. And in all probability, Psalm 118 was written to commemorate that great day of purification and the battle which Judas Maccabaeus won. It is a conqueror's psalm.

And it is the psalm which the crowd chants as Jesus enters Jerusalem. Yes Jesus had claimed to be the Messiah, but in such a way as to try to show that their popular ideas of the Messiah were misguided. But the people did not see it. Their welcome was one more appropriate for a conqueror who would shatter the enemies of Israel, not the King of love.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem that day, he claimed to be a king, but he claimed to be a King of peace. His action - riding on a donkey - was a contradiction of all that the people hoped for and expected. He came meek and lowly. He came in peace and for peace. And as such he changed the world. And at the time, they did not understand.

Sometimes I wonder if we understand. Sure we know the stories, we may even know claim to know what they mean. But do we really understand?

What would it mean to make Jesus the King of our lives? And not only in some grand philosophical sense, but King of our daily lives.

- What if our relationship with God were the number one priority in our lives?
- What if going to Sunday School were more important than playing on the team?
- What if giving to the church were more important than supporting other charities?
- What if going to worship were more important than sleeping in?
- What if Jesus was the most important person in our lives?

I don't think the disciples could predict the changes that would take place in their lives because of Jesus any more than we can. But what we can learn from the disciples in all of this is two things: obedience and faithfulness

First, their obedience is crucial to Jesus' fulfilling of Old Testament prophecy. Their cooperation with their Master's plans is necessary. History is about to turn a corner and the disciples are part of it.

And secondly, their faithfulness to Jesus is remarkable. If we look closely at our reading this morning, we see that there is no parade with multitudes flocking to see the grand procession.

No crowds come out from the city to meet him; all we have are “many people” spreading their cloaks on the ground with others spreading palm branches. As for the shouting, it is merely “those who went ahead and those who followed.”

The disciples are Jesus’ steady companions through it all to the end of the day when they all go back to Bethany together. As he nears the loneliest moments of his journey to the cross, their presence at his side must mean more than they could know. They might not get it, but they’re faithful.

And also for us - our obedience and faithfulness to Jesus mean more than we will truly know this side of heaven. And the good news is - you don’t need to wait until you fully understand. For in your obedience and faithfulness you will know Jesus and his Kingdom. The understanding isn’t the point - the following is.

2000 years ago, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey – the most unlikely entrance for the King, the Messiah. And He rides today, asking our obedience and faithfulness.

Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem 2000 years ago is not so different from our experience as Christians in New England today. We are a small, fairly inconsequential group following a King who continues to subvert the dominant attitudes and values of society. Some are hostile to the Christian faith; but most are indifferent.

But faithful we remain. The church announces his arrival; we lead the way and we follow His lead. We lay down our lives and take up our crosses, all the way shouting Hosanna.

And it is important to note that when the people shouted Hosanna 2,000 years ago it was not a cry of praise to Jesus, as we might think. Rather it was a cry to God to break in and save his people now that the Messiah had come.

The word Hosanna actually means *Save Now* – fitting don’t you think? For that is exactly what Jesus is about to do as he heads for the cross - where he fulfills his purpose, securing salvation for the world.

The journey begins now. Divinity is sitting on the donkey and is ready to head toward the city. We’ll face some opposition to be sure, but we’ve got each other.

The King needs you. So let’s go!
Amen.