

Palm Sunday  
March 25, 2018

### **Prisoners of Hope**

**Zechariah 9:9-12**  
**Matthew 21:1-11**

*They brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. – Matthew 21:7*

The second reading this morning is Matthew's account of the first Palm Sunday. Listen now for what the Spirit is saying to the church:

*When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately."<sup>4</sup> This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,*

*<sup>5</sup> "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."*

*<sup>6</sup> The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup> they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup> A very large crowd<sup>9</sup> spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup> 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!"*

*<sup>10</sup> When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" <sup>11</sup> The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."*

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Let us pray:

It is right that we should sing to you, Lord Jesus, because you come. When our ancestors sang to you, you arrived to sacrifice your life for the us in love. On this day when you entered Jerusalem to begin your passion, in the triumph

of humility, the world-changing power of vulnerability and peace, a very large crowd followed you. We also wish to walk in your way. You are the King of king and Lord of lords! Let our songs and our palm branches stand for the victory of self-giving love. Amen

Palm Sunday is an **anniversary** for us. The first day of Holy Week was also **my first Sunday with you** back in 2011. One of my happy discoveries – you know there are always things the Pastor Nominating Committee doesn't tell you – a wonderful surprise that first Sunday was the Donkey Parade, the local custom, reenacting Jesus' original entry into Jerusalem. For those who have never seen it, or those joining us by livestream, the parade begins down by Sunrise. -- the residents love interacting with the children and the other animals. The parade, led by one of the children dressed as Jesus, travels across the property, kids and adults waving palms and singing "Hosanna!"

I liked the whole thing so much on my first Sunday that I posted a photo on social media with a caption that read something like:

"My church has a live donkey on Palm Sunday and yours doesn't."

Probably not the wisest move. Friends in Florida, South Carolina and California posted back that "Well, it's Palm Sunday. We have actual palms. You have bitter cold east winds and those poor little stringy poor-excuse-for-palm things." The next year we started importing actual palms! I don't like to lose.

But losing may actually be the point here, losing in the way of laying down one's life for Jesus' sake, for the sake of the Kingdom, for the sake of the world. Jesus rode into the city on his first day of Holy Week. His first day in Jerusalem began with a **very clear, intentional display of humility and subversive love.**

It was anything but the Triumphal Entry his disciples expected. As Jesus prepared to ascend the Mount of Olives and ride into Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday he dispatched two of his disciples to fetch the animal. Matthew devotes more than half of Palm Sunday story to the details surrounding the prophecy and procurement of this little donkey – where to go, what kind of animal, or rather animals, to bring, what to do and say.

No one knows, of course, what the disciples thought about all this, but I agree with New Testament scholar, Tom Long. I'm fairly certain they had imagined a grander and nobler role on this day, better than being on donkey detail. Matthew doesn't say which two disciples Jesus sent into the village to pilfer the donkeys. It could have been James and John, the ones who, only hours earlier had been jockeying for position, angling for glory, arguing about who was the greatest. It's deliciously ironic that on this very public, glorious day of Jesus' ministry – a day when he's welcomed into the Holy City with joyous hosannas, that these two, whoever they were, found themselves mucking around with the donkeys, looking suspiciously like horse thieves. For *this* they left their fishing boats? <sup>i</sup>

But isn't that the way it always is? What it means to love Jesus? In the end? To love him to the end? Following Jesus means **preparing the way for him** in the world. Following Jesus means doing whatever needs to be done, whatever is necessary so that his word may be heard and his glory seen in the world. Being Jesus' disciple is just as much about fixing an overflowing toilet as it is about playing the Widor Toccata or singing the offeratory solo.

Or to put it another way, somebody has to get the donkey.

Sarah Dzinnik, our wonderful Woods' Coordinator for Families with Children, has been the donkey fetcher this year. And it hasn't been easy! Some of you remember Jimmy, star of the Palm Sunday for many years. Jimmy went to his reward, and so did Zechariah, his successor. For a long time was bereft of any animal at all. Then, one day, a few weeks ago, Sarah showed up in my office doorway and announced, "We have a donkey!" "Not only that," she exclaimed. "We have two! Our donkey has an emotional support animal." Here they are. **[slide up]** Our donkey's emotional support animal is Shetland pony.

"Two animals," said I, "*that's* entirely biblical." Did you notice in gospel reading from Matthew there *are* two animals – a donkey *and* a colt? The other gospels only mention one, but Matthew makes it sound like Jesus rode

**both of them into Jerusalem, like a circus performer.** Actually, that's not what he meant, he's remembering Zechariah, the sixth-century Hebrew prophet.

Zechariah imagines a king who will come, not with a chariot, not on a war-horse, but

*Humbly on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

It looks like Matthew, the gospel writer, got so excited when he read the prophet's words of peace that he added a conjunction, turning the one beast into two. But the message is still the same. The fact is,

*He will cut off the chariot and the war-horse ...  
and he shall command peace to the nations.*

We need that, don't we? With all the talk of war with North Korea and Iran, with dozens burned to death in Syrian strikes on East Ghouta, another school shooting, **this time in Maryland**, and a terrorist attack in France. The world is a mess and the primary reason is that a lot of people are hell-bent on having the kind of leaders who swagger around and brag of their strength, rather than a humble kind whose primary weapons are the word of truth, the compassion of heilig, the establishment of justice and the practice of kindness.

Your king is coming, said Zechariah. He is humble riding on a donkey and the foal of a donkey – two animals or one, no matter, the message is the same. This king will “cut off the chariot and the warhorse. He will “bring peace to the nations” His **dominion shall over all the I-want-a-military-parade-with-tanks-and missiles kind of a kings**. This is a humble king, a healing king, the one who comes riding on a farm animal, *this kind* will save his people, announces the prophet. And then this wonderful line:

*He will return the “prisoners of hope.”*

We need a ruler like that. We do.

We are more like the people who gathered on the first Palm Sunday than we think. Like them we have come to sing songs of liberation and freedom. Theirs were Passover songs. They pinned their hopes on the man who had healed their diseases, blessed their children and confronted public hypocrisy. He taught compassion and “the ways of God and pictured the puffed-up pride of those who pretend to speak for God.”<sup>ii</sup> I can't think of anything we need more than that today.

We are much the same. Our song is “Hosanna.” It means “Save us!” in Hebrew. Like the people in the crowd we need him. We are prisoners of hope.

Leah Sherubu is a prisoner of hope. The *Guardian*<sup>iii</sup> reported yesterday that Leah, one of 110 Nigerian schoolgirls kidnapped last month by Boko Haram had refused to deny her Christian faith when the rest of the kidnapped girls were returned to their families, so she was not released alongside the other girls. Please pray for Leah and all the others children and their families impacted by this terrible crime.

The young people who are organizing across the country to demand safe schools are prisoners of hope. Fifteen-year-old Tres Bosley gave himself that title when he spoke yesterday on behalf on his brother, Terrell who died. Like his brother Tre is an honor student. Terrell was a talented musician and a member of the Praise Band at church. He held a sign that simply said, “Stop the Violence!”

One of my person heroes is retired Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa. During the years of struggle against grip of apartheid, Tutu was a beacon of hope in South Africa. When the government sanctioned system of segregation officially ended in 1994 Tutu had led the way to a new future for his country.

In recent years, he has faced a personal battle with cancer, all the while his radiant spirit again has shown through. When the World Methodist Conference met in Nairobi in 1986 Tutu was the preacher. After the service the procession of worshippers spilled out into the street. The whole crowd was singing, drumming, dancing to exuberant African songs. And there was Tutu in the midst of them, a tiny little man **carrying the weight of the nation on his shoulders**, dancing with the children, laughing his high-pitched laugh, leading the parade. In the midst of an incredible struggle, this humble, servant of a man experienced death threats and rejection, and – most formidable of all – a social structure that showed no signs of relenting. Yet it did just that.

For many decades now, Tutu has continued to lead with remarkable wisdom and joy. He has leaned into a vision of the future that is deeply rooted in the hope of Christ’s promised kingdom.

A well-known television host once said to the Archbishop, “I have always thought of you as an optimist.” Archbishop Tutu replied, “No. I am not an optimist. I am a prisoner of hope.”<sup>iv</sup>

On another occasion Tutu said:

“I am always hopeful. A Christian is a prisoner of hope. What could have looked more hopeless than Good Friday? But then, at Easter, God says, ‘From this moment on, no situation that cannot be transformed.’ There is no situation,” concludes the Archbishop, “from which God cannot extract good.”<sup>v</sup>

It’s true! Because God has come to us in Jesus Christ we are irrepressible prisoners of hope, doing whatever is necessary, whenever it is necessary laying down one everything – even those rights and privileges that charm us so – laying it for Jesus’ sake, for the sake of the Kingdom, for the sake of the world.

Someone has to get the donkey. Right, Sarah? The disciples’ service, Jesus’ humble choice of transportation – it couldn’t have been more intentional, or appropriate, and in it we find the heart of the Savior’s message.

It is a beautiful story, a story of great humility. On the other side of the city, that day Pontius Pilate was entering the city with chariots and war horses. Pilate was surrounded by well-armed soldiers bearing weapons and heavy armor. It was a visible reminder who was really in charge, or so they thought.

Jesus entered the city surrounded by unarmed peasants waving palm branches singing “Hosanna, Loud Hosanna.” Two thousand years later the only reason we know Pilate’s name is that each time we say the Apostle’s Creed, we say that Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.”

Ultimately humility, service and peace won out over brute force, as it will one day when our final chapter is written.

Until then, we are prisoners of hope.

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<sup>ii</sup> Thomas G. Long, “Donkey Fetchers,” *Christian Century*, April 4, 2006, 18

<sup>iii</sup> William G. Carter, “Saddle Them Up” a sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church, Clarks Summit, PA, April 9, 2017

<sup>iii</sup> Ruth Maclean and Isaac Abrak “Boko Haram kept one Dapchi girl who refused to deny her Christianity” *The Guardian*, March 25, 2011

<sup>iv</sup> Piers Morgan Tonight, CNN, April 26, 2011.

<sup>v</sup> *Christianity Today*, October 5, 1992, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “A Prisoner of Hope.” Cited in “Ministry as the Marketing of Hope,” by David Wesley Reid, *The Clergy Journal*, August 1994, 15.