Good Lord, Deliver Us
Luke 19:28-44
March 20 (Palm Sunday)

I’ve been asked before why I don’t pray before I preach, which is an interesting assumption for someone to make. How would they know?

What they mean to ask, I think, is why I don’t kneel in front of them to pray. Why don’t I show you that I’m praying?

If you’re wondering, I assure you, I pray before I preach. I hope you do, as well.

The sermon, of course, isn’t just about what the preacher has to say. It’s also what God has the hearers hear. Sometimes you hear surprising things. You’ll tell Josh or me something you heard and we’ll ask the other later, “Did I say that?” “No.”

Sermons are shared experiences. We need you to be as engaged as we seek to be for a sermon to work. We should all be praying before one of us preaches. You should be praying while we’re preaching. Come to think of it, maybe that’s why I see so many closed eyes during the sermons. Thank you for your prayers.

There’s a prayer in our hymnal that some of my colleagues pray before they preach. It’s a prayer from Kenya found at number 597. I want you to turn to it so we can pray together.

From the cowardice that dares not face new truth,
From the laziness that is contented with half-truths,
From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth,
Good Lord, deliver me. Amen.¹

This prayer has been on my mind lately. I can’t imagine why. Cowardice, half-truths, arrogance. What, lately, could have brought these things to mind?

Jesus had to deal with politics. The Roman authorities were in Jerusalem for the Passover. They came in force, but not to worship. They were there to keep their version of peace, to control the population, to oppress.

The Jews had a story they told every Passover, a story the Roman officials did not like, a story of how God acted mightily to free them from Pharaoh’s harsh grip. It was story of salvation, a political story, a story of rescue from an unjust government by a God bent on justice and peace.

The Palm Sunday reading drops us into this world of political and religious friction, where the memory of what God has done inspired hope in some and fear and aggravation in others. Those Jews who might be tempted to let the past inspire the future needed a strong sense of the present, and the Roman soldiers were there to give them that.

But there was also a new truth being revealed and some had the courage to face it, embrace it, celebrate it. A colt that had never been ridden was secured for the one who brought the new truth, who was the new truth.

Herod’s men may have arrived on impressive stallions, but Jewish kings were accustomed to donkeys.

Zechariah told Israel to rejoice, to shout because “your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious...humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

A colt would look ridiculous beside a stallion, unless you knew Zechariah’s prophecy. Those who did knew this wasn’t a horse race. Jesus didn’t need a war horse with strength. His way was different. A donkey would serve his ways just fine.

A donkey is humble, low to the ground. Unlike the mighty sight of a war horse, you weren’t intimated by a colt, you wanted to pet it. Unlike the proud, fierce Roman soldiers, you didn’t get out of Jesus’ way when he arrived, you went to him. People, willingly, spread their cloaks before him. No coercion. No intimidation. No one forcibly removed for disagreeing. Just loud voices saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Kings come in many different ways and for many different reasons, but blessed is one who comes with God’s ways on his heart. Blessed is the one who seeks peace. Blessed is the king who has the courage to bring new truth.

The crowds were inspired to sing their praise. “The whole multitude of disciples,” praised God, we’re told. Only, the Pharisees did not.

It’s dangerous to praise in public. The Romans were watching, getting angry, doubting their allegiance to Caesar. Better to be quiet, pray silently, keep praise where it belongs (in the Temple). Be faithful to God on the Sabbath; be faithful to Rome every other day – half-loyal to God, half-loyal to Caesar.

Half-truths are tempting because they’re comfortable, reassuring, can please multiple constituencies. The Kenyan prayer asks for deliverance from laziness, laziness that accepts half-truths. It recognizes that accepting half-truths is easier than seeking whole truths or having to do the work required when we learn a new truth.

Rallies can give us half-truths: slogans are easy to spout, excitement is contagious, someone says something you like and now that another has said it, it’s not just you. Your thought has been validated. It’s fun to be part of, comforting to be with a crowd that thinks the way you think.

When “the whole multitude” praised God as Jesus rode the colt into Jerusalem, it was fun. It was exciting. The chants came out easily, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” Later that week, how many of those same voices energetically shouted, “Crucify him!” – crucify the very same king?

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2 Zechariah 9:9
There are times when our devotion is sincere and sticks, but there are plenty of times when its sincerity is fleeting. When the demand is too high or the distractions too great and the half-truths feel like all the truth we care to handle.

We resist new truth, are content with half-truths, and, perhaps most frightening of all, can begin to think we’ve conquered all truth, sorted it all out. Know all the truth that needs to be known.

The Pharisees knew a lot about religion. They had the rules down, what was supposed to happen, and how. They were good at their job as religious gate-keepers.

They show us what we already know to be true: that it’s possible to know a lot about the God of history and miss the God of the present. The Pharisees were so busy protecting a God they read about, certain they had all the necessary knowledge about, that they missed when he was about, walking with them, talking to them, healing before them, dying for them.

When we arrogantly think that we know all truth, and are clutching it so tightly that we squeeze our eyes shut and put our fingers in our ears, we miss the truths God is revealing right before our eyes. We miss God with us. We miss God bringing peace to us. We end up saying, “Tell the people praising God to be quiet. Tell the people critiquing injustice to hush.”

The Kenyan prayer asks for deliverance, but not from truth. The prayer has nothing against truth. The prayer asks for deliverance from cowardice, laziness, and arrogance.

The Lord, riding his colt, entered Jerusalem bravely, determinedly, and humbly, revealing truth each clip-clop along the way.

And then, the one who would deliver us, paused, looked across the Kidron Valley, stared at the Temple Mount, looked beyond it to a place called “The Skull,” watched soldiers moving about on powerful horses and patrolmen on the ramparts, and he wept.

He wept because in their resistance to new truth, in their acceptance of half-truths, and in their arrogantly thinking they held all truth, they did not recognize the things that make for peace. They shut their eyes, their ears, and their hearts to God among them. Jesus wept because if they wouldn’t take up his ways while he was with them, how could he expect them to take up his ways when he was with them no more?

Unless you realize the things that make for peace, he’s just a silly man riding a silly colt and you aren’t sure why.

Those people, Jesus’ people, all people needed deliverance – deliverance from themselves, from their occupiers, from occupying, from cowardice, laziness, and arrogance. They needed something radical, something to stir them more than a rally or a slogan. They needed love that emptied itself so utterly, so completely, that its truth still would be wrestled with 2000 years later. They needed a God who would love unto death, even death on a cross.

They needed deliverance that came through a man riding a colt. And, so do we.