

Palm Sunday B
Mark 11:1-11
March 24, 2024

Two Beasts of Burden
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When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, [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. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’ Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

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Theologians have wrestled with some pretty bizarre questions over the centuries like: “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?” and “Do hair and fingernails keep growing in heaven?” Well, the latest head-scratcher is “What would Jesus drive?” Would he choose public transportation or own a car? Would it be a

stick shift or an automatic? A sport-utility vehicle roomy enough for all 12 apostles or an economy model?

One ecologically-minded minister suggests that Jesus would choose an environmentally friendly vehicle, such as a Toyota Prius, with its hybrid gasoline-electric motor. Maybe an EV would be even better! But other “theologians” disagree. Some insist that Jesus actually drove a Honda but preferred not to discuss it. As proof, they cite a verse in John's gospel in which Jesus tells a crowd, “For I did not speak of my own Accord.” Debate continues over whether his Honda had bumper stickers that said, “My other car is a flaming chariot,” “Honk if you love *me*” or “This is my beloved son, in whom I am well-pleased because he was an honor student at Galilee Elementary,”¹

While these “scholars” make a good case for the Honda, I think we all know that Jesus really “drove” a donkey, as evidenced by our reading this morning from the Gospel According to Mark. I’m guessing we can all agree that a donkey is not a particularly glamorous way to travel—not what you’d drive if you wanted “to be seen.” There is, however, no doubt that Jesus had a reason for choosing to ride this particular creature into Jerusalem.

We call Jesus’ Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem the “Triumphal Entry.” In ancient Rome a triumph was a military and religious observance that publicly celebrated and sanctified the achievements of a commander who had won great victory for the empire. The triumph included a parade with captured enemies, spoils of war, the commander in a chariot, and members of the armed services. The commander being honored was showered with flowers and palm fronds could be waved to signify peace. In a way, Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem mirrored a Roman triumph. Jesus was hailed as the one who would defeat the Romans

¹ “Theologians have wrestled with some pretty bizarre questions over the centuries,” Emmitsburg.net: http://www.emmitsburg.net/humor/archives/religious/heaven_3.htm.

occupying his homeland and holding the people under the heel of the empire's boot. These singing, palm-bearing crowds believed that Jesus would bring victory and peace to their people. It may be a little difficult for us to know the kind of joy and hope that filled the people that time. "Perhaps this entrance of Jesus evokes the kind of joy and relief that we can only imagine for example, when United Nations troops arrive in a country torn apart by genocide, or when a convoy of trucks carries grain to starving people.²"

The crowds on that long-ago Sunday were filled to overflowing with excitement, so much so that, as Jesus said, to silence them would have been to make the stones sing their song. Unlike the Roman triumph however, Jesus rode no warhorse and certainly stood in no chariot. Peace does not ride in on the back of a warhorse. Instead, Jesus rode a donkey.

Meanwhile, in another part of Jerusalem, at very nearly the same time, a second triumphal entry would have taken place—that of Roman governor Pontius Pilate, who was coming to keep the peace during Passover, the celebration of Israel's freedom from slavery under the Egyptians. Pilate would have certainly been accompanied by soldiers and he would have chosen another beast of burden to symbolize his power, force, and command. Pilate would have ridden a warhorse.

We have a warhorse and a donkey, two members of the same genus, two beasts of burden, two very different modes of transportation for Pilate and Jesus, and symbolizing two very different modes of operating in the world. On the one hand there is the warhorse, filled with bitterness and fury, ready to gallop into battle. And on the other hand, there is the donkey, at times indignant, but an ancient symbol of peace.

² Kathryn Matthews Huey. "Commentary," Ucc.org, March 28, 2010.

We see both the war horses and the peaceful donkeys in the world around us: in the ways governments respond with military might when pressed or threatened, rushing like a warhorse headlong into battle rather than taking the donkey's approach of firmly, but peacefully resisting the perceived evil; we see individuals gallop directly into the eye of the storm, into the center of a conflict rather than approach it gently and with intention.

In choosing the way of peace, the donkey, however, is not agreeing with or condoning an act that should not have happened or a state of being that simply should not be. It is, however, choosing a different response—an intentional decision to acknowledge differences and work toward the possibility of real, lasting reconciliation.

There are many examples we could point to of those who have chosen the way of the donkey, the way of reconciliation, the way of peace, but I can think of none more poignant, none more profound than the Amish response to the tragic shooting of nearly two decades ago that left 5 of their children and the gunman dead at a school house in Pennsylvania. Just hours later, members of the Amish community comforted the shooter's family and extended forgiveness to them.

In a letter to the Amish community the widow of the shooter wrote, "Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. Gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you."³

³ Damien McElroy. "Amish Killer's Widow Thanks Families of Victims," Telegraph.co, October 16, 2006: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1531570/Amish-killers-widow-thanks-families-of-victims-for-forgiveness.html>.

This is the way of reconciliation, the way of peace. If we're honest, I think we'll agree that the way of peace is difficult. It's kind of like choosing the high road when the low road just happens to follow the warm shoreline of some distant beach and the high road is a particularly brutal winter on lake Michigan.

The way of peace, however, does not simply begin by responding in an unimaginably charitable way in the face of tremendous atrocity. Choosing the way of peace can begin by moving toward self-acceptance and a recognition of one's own unique way of being in the world. Choosing the way of peace can begin with an over-due word of cooperation. Choosing the way of peace can begin with an honest handshake, a warm smile, a cup of hospitality, a gentle compromise, a fruitful conversation on a touchy subject, a shared toy, a heartfelt invitation. These too are things that make for peace. This Palm Sunday let us follow in the donkey's footsteps.

Together, may we be instruments of God's peace;
where there is hatred, let us sow love;
where there is injury, pardon:
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope
where there is darkness, light
where there is sadness, joy
May we not so much seek to be consoled
as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying we awaken to Eternal Life.⁴

Amen.

⁴ Attributed to St. Francis of Assisi