

## **“Palm Sunday: The Ironic Parade”**

Date: April 14, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Luke 19:28-40; Luke 23:1-25

Occasion: Palm Sunday, year C

Theme: Palm Sunday, irony

A joke to begin our time together: It was Palm Sunday, and because of a severe sore throat, five-year old Tommy stayed home from church with his father. When the rest of the family returned home, they were carrying several palm branches. The boy asked what they were for.

“People held them over Jesus’ head as he walked by.” “Wouldn’t you know it, the boy fumed, “the one Sunday I don’t go and He shows up!”

How about another story? It goes like this: It was Palm Sunday and Jesus was coming into Jerusalem. He was riding on a blazing white stallion and kicking up a cloud of dust as he rode along. He was looking for trouble.

The people he passed on his way were in awe of such a beautiful animal, but they were even more awestruck by the man who was riding it. As Jesus passed by, you could hear people say, “Who was that masked man?”

There were bad guys on the loose and Jesus had a job to do. As he rode into Jerusalem he quickly sized up the situation and formed a plan to capture the ring leader of the trouble makers. His name was Diablo, or Satan. There was a short scuffle, but Jesus won, hands down, over Diablo. He hog-tied the devil and threw him in jail.

As a large crowd of people gathered to see what the commotion was all about, Jesus mounted his horse and pulled on the reigns. The stallion stood on its hind legs, neighed loudly, and pawed the air with its front legs. When it stood as tall as it could, Jesus leaned forward in the saddle. Holding the reigns with one hand while lifting his white hat in the air with

other, he shouted with a loud voice, “Hi ho, Silver, away!” As Jesus rode off into the sunset, you could hear the William Tell Overture in the background. Du du dunt. Du du dunt. Du du dunt dunt dunt! (1)

Isn't that how *you* would have done it if you were Jesus? It's how *most* of us imagine our heroes saving the day. But that *isn't* the way Jesus revealed God's love to the world. In fact, it is almost the exact opposite, proving that God's ways are not our ways.

There is irony throughout this story. It begins like an espionage novel. Jesus draws two of his followers aside and he gives them a mission. “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, “Why are you untying it?” just say this, “The Lord needs it.”

The two disciples go and find the colt. The question is asked, and the password is given. “The Lord needs it.” It's an odd beginning to an odd story. There's the suggestion of secrecy and premeditation. Arrangements are made and plans formulated, and in the end the transfer goes off without a hitch. It's like a Cold War story of a Berlin Wall encounter in that fraught space between freedom and captivity.

In the next scene, Jesus moves from being the orchestrator of events, to someone literally going along for the ride. The disciples bring the colt and “set Jesus on it.” What does that mean? It could mean anything from giving him a little boost up onto the animal's back, to physically hoisting him up there – lifting him up off the ground and onto the colts back.

Now the energy of the story comes not from Jesus but from the people around him. The people throw their cloaks on the ground before Jesus, as he starts the ride down the mountain. They sing praises to God “for all the deeds of power that they had seen.”

People raise palm branches in the air and shout “hosanna.” Palm branches were a symbol of victory in the Roman Empire. Here, the branches laid on the path as Jesus rode into Jerusalem can now be seen as symbolic of his victory over death. A symbolism they would not have understood at the time.

The story ends with Jesus in conversation with some Pharisees who ask him to make his disciples settle down. Luke does not tell us why they do this. Perhaps they disapprove of the disciple’s behavior. Perhaps, with so many tourists in Jerusalem for Passover, they may be wary of a potential disturbance.

Maybe they are genuinely concerned for Jesus’ safety. Whatever their intentions, Jesus says this. “If these people were to become silent, the very stones would shout out.” Creation itself will give witness to the one who rides on the back of this donkey. (2)

So, let’s talk about this donkey. People often speak of donkeys in belittling terms. You may have heard the expression, “I’m just someone who has to do all the donkey-work.” Or, “So-and-so is as stubborn as a mule,” which is part donkey.

But these sayings overlook the contribution of a truly valuable animal. Donkeys have served the human race for thousands of years. They were once prized as symbols of humility, gentleness and peace.

In Bible days, donkeys that had never been ridden were regarded as especially suitable for religious purposes. So it was most fitting that Jesus sent for a colt to perform the royal task of carrying him into Jerusalem. It was an honor to carry the King of kings and Lord of lords into the holy city.

How enviable was that donkey’s mission! And how like our mission as Jesus’ followers. A missionary in China calls herself “the Lord’s donkey.”

She's a humble believer, "carrying" her Lord faithfully into town after town and training others to do likewise. The Lord has need of many such "donkeys" in our world today, humble people who will carry him into their Jerusalem and make Him known.

The donkey had to be untied before Jesus could use it. We too must be released from worldly attachments if we are to serve Christ. Are you willing to be the Lord's donkey? (3)

God's ways are not our ways. Maybe we would envision riding into town on a white stallion, but instead Jesus came riding on the back of a humble donkey to serve, in fact to lay his life down.

And so today we wave our palm branches, honoring the One who comes in the name of the Lord. We recognize Jesus as our Savior. It is a joyous day. But two thousand years later, we also know what is coming. We know how the events of Holy Week will unfold, and still we are called to sing, to rejoice, to celebrate.

There's a part of me that thinks it's all too much – too loud, too celebratory. Part of me thinks we would do better to sit down and be quiet. But if I don't sing, if you don't sing, the rocks and stones themselves will shout. So we might as well sing.

Palm Sunday calls us into an in-between space – into an uncomfortable space between freedom and captivity, friendship and betrayal, outrageous joy and unspeakable sorrow, life and death. Somewhere between Bethany and Jerusalem a parade is forming, that in a certain light, looks like a funeral procession. (4)

We know what is coming, but we are not there yet. We are in between and we are asked to sing. It is uncomfortable, singing even as we weep. A triumphal entry that turns deadly. Palm Sunday, an ironic parade.

Resources:

- (1) Adapted from “Not the Lone Ranger, But the Lone Savior,” by Roger Griffith. *Sermon-Illustrations.com*, March 20, 2002.
- (2) “The by Living Word” *Christian Century*, March 27, 2019, by Ron Adams, lead pastor of Landisville Mennonite Church in Pennsylvania.
- (3) *Our Daily Bread*, March 24, 2001.
- (4) “The by Living Word” *Christian Century*, March 27, 2019, by Ron Adams, lead pastor of Landisville Mennonite Church in Pennsylvania.