

"LOOK,
YOUR KING
IS COMING,
SITTING ON A
DONKEY'S COLT!"



JOHN 12:15, NRSV

Rollstone Congregational Church

United Church of Christ
199 Main Street, Fitchburg, MA

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Moderator: Paul Stansel 978-337-1608

Church Organist and Musician: Gavin Klein

Palm Sunday

Sixth Sunday of Lent

March 28, 2021

Prelude:

Herzlich That Mich Verlangen

JS Bach

Focusing on the Lenten Journey:

As Jesus came into Jerusalem that day long ago, riding a donkey, the people whispered, "What's his name? Who is he?" The crowd shouted back, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" But who is he? His disciples praised God joyfully for all his mighty deeds of power. They shouted, "Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven." But do we know him by his name?

And the people who gathered and lined the roadway shout, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Jesus is his name!" Bless His holy name on this day when he rode triumphantly into Jerusalem.

The Palms Arrive: (As this litany of the palms is read the hymn "All Glory, Laud and Honor" is played and we will join in singing after the palms are in place.)

Lift your hands! Wave your palms! Give glory and honor to the Lord! As this was happening the people shouted.... "Hosanna in the highest! All praise to Jesus the Christ, our redeemer and king."

He is worthy of our praise, for he comes in the name of the Lord to save us. And still the crowd shouted.... "Hosanna in the highest! He is holy. He is righteous. Worship the Lord!"

May all majesty, power and dominion belong to Christ our Lord and Savior. May we forever shout....

"Hosanna in the highest! In joy and gratitude we sing praise to the Lamb of God."

"All Glory, Laud and Honor"

All glory, laud, and honor to you, Redeemer, King,
to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring.
You are the King of Israel and David's royal Son,
now in the Lord's name coming, the King and Blessed One.

The company of angels is praising you on high;
and we with all creation in chorus make reply.
The people of the Hebrews with palms before you went;
our praise and prayer and anthems before you we present.

To you before your passion they sang their hymns of praise;
to you, now high exalted, our melody we raise.
As you received their praises, accept the prayers we bring,
for you delight in goodness, O good and gracious King!

A Time of Prayer:

Humble Jesus, who rides into our cities, who draws near to our lives, we, too, rise to greet you, to shout our hosannas, to feel life stir within us, to sense hope quickening in our hearts. For you are a great God, a compassionate ruler, a loving friend, a wise counselor.

But deep in the distance, in some far corner of our being, we fear your arrival. For you gently offer us a choice, and to choose you means letting go of jealousies and resentments, our private wars against others and our timid acceptance of ourselves.

Like the people of Jerusalem, we discover you are more than we first thought. Beyond loud hosannas, you ask our obedience and our worship. And we are learning, piece by piece, to turn that over to you.

This day, this week, move us into the deeper levels of ourselves. Let us feel again your pain of that last week. Let us touch our own wounds, trusting you. Easter is the sign of new hope for us. Amen.

A Reading from the Scriptures:

Mark 11:1-11 (NIV)

11When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples 2and 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. 3If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately."' 4They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, 5some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' 6They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. 7Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. 8Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. 9Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

'Hosanna!

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

10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

11 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.

Musical Interlude: Interlude from *The Way of the Cross* Mark Callaghan

A Time of Prayer – *let us remember all of our brothers and sisters on the prayer list, especially those who are having a difficult time during this period of social distancing. Please share your prayer concerns so that they may be added to the prayer list by emailing your concern to Pastor Dave at dbhanks92@comcast.net or by calling him direct at 978-821-9571. He is available every evening and on weekends. During this time we suggest that you create a prayer partner with whom you can pair up until we are able to worship together at the church.*

desperation, the man said a prayer. “Please, dear Lord. Please make this donkey stop before I go off the end of this mountain, In Jesus’ name, AMEN.” The donkey came to an abrupt stop just one step from the edge of the cliff.

“HALLELUJAH!” shouted the man.

The moral of that story is that donkeys are not as dumb as one might think.

Today is Palm Sunday and it is named for the “leafy branches” that people cut in the fields and placed on the road in front of Jesus (Mark 11:8). It’s the day we think of crowds shouting “Hosanna” and Jesus entering Jerusalem in triumph, hailed as the “the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” (v. 9). Palm Sunday is a day of celebration, with people cheering the One they hoped would usher in “the kingdom of our ancestor David!” (v. 10).

What we usually don’t think about is the colt that Jesus rode into town, described in Matthew as “the foal of a donkey” (21:5) and in John as “a donkey’s colt” (12:15).

And that’s a shame. Because today could easily be called “Donkey Sunday.”

Unfortunately, donkeys have “a bad reputation,” says archaeologist Fiona Marshall. “They’re considered stupid, and stubborn and lowly.” But this is unfair and inaccurate. Donkeys are “extremely intelligent,” she says. “Whole trade routes were built on donkeys, and the wealth of ancient Egypt depended on them.”

You know why the donkey went to the bank, don’t you? He needed to burro some money.

Donkeys are even smart enough to celebrate holidays. Around Christmas, they send out Mule-tide greetings.

Many years ago, traders went all the way from the Middle East to China, along with their donkeys. And in the Tang Dynasty, high-class women played a game like polo, in which players rode donkeys instead of horses. When one particular noblewoman died, she had donkeys sacrificed and buried with her, so that she could continue to ride them in the afterlife.

Stupid, stubborn and lowly? That was not the reputation of donkeys in ancient China.

Jesus knew what he was doing when he made his preparations to enter Jerusalem. He sent two of his disciples ahead of him, saying 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” (Mark 11:1-2). Jesus was taking his chances with an unbroken colt, but he knew that the animal was intelligent, not stupid.

Predicting that the two disciples would encounter resistance, he said to them, “If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately’” (v. 3). Jesus realized that he would have to get people talking if he was going to gather a crowd on the road to Jerusalem. So, he had his followers spread the word that the Lord needed a donkey, and he would return it right away.

Jesus was building a buzz among the people of the village. Creating controversy. Injecting some suspense.

Sure enough, the disciples went into the village and found a colt in the street, just as Jesus predicted. And as they were untying it, people confronted them, just

as Jesus said they would. When they told them what Jesus had said, the people allowed the disciples to take it. The donkey was cooperative, not stubborn (vv. 4-6).

The disciples brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it. Jesus sat on it and began to ride it toward Jerusalem (v. 7). He knew that the prophet Zechariah had predicted that the coming ruler of God's people would arrive in Jerusalem on a donkey: "Lo, your king comes to you," said the prophet; "triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9).

In ancient times, leaders would ride donkeys in civil processions and horses in military ones, so a king arriving on a donkey would indicate that he was arriving in peace. Jesus remembered that Solomon had been riding a donkey when he was recognized as the new king of Israel (1 Kings 1:33). The donkey was noble, not lowly.

Mark tells us that many people "spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields" (Mark 11:8). But what were these leafy branches compared to the beast that Jesus was riding? The animal was intelligent, cooperative and noble — a heroic donkey!

Yes, today really should be called Donkey Sunday, not Palm Sunday.

Then the people "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!'" (vv. 9-10). Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah by entering Jerusalem as the ruler of God's people, humble and riding on a donkey. And after riding the animal to the temple, he went out to Bethany with his disciples. Along the way, he probably took the time to return the colt to its owner.

Jesus made a conscious decision to ride a donkey, not a horse. "Horses are speedy," writes Christopher McDougall, "but when it comes to steadiness, stamina, and heroic resistance to heat, cold and thirst, you can't do better than a burro." McDougall is not surprised that people of all stripes — prophets, Mary, Jesus, King Solomon, Muhammad, and even Queen Victoria — have made donkeys their favorite form of transport. Even George Washington, who was described by Thomas Jefferson as "the greatest horseman of his age," was actually a donkey guy. When King George of Spain gave a pair of burros to Washington, he turned them into America's only breeding herd. Burro, in case you were wondering, is simply the Spanish word for donkey.

McDougall became a fan of the animals when he entered a donkey named Sherman in a burro race in Leadville, Colorado. Yes, a burro race. This competition goes back to the days when miners would race one another over the trails with their donkeys at their sides. In burro races, the competitors don't get on top of their donkeys, as Jesus did. Instead, they run alongside them, sometimes for 23 miles, over peaks as high as 13,500 feet. Win the race, McDougall writes, "and walk away with \$500. Assuming you still can." For McDougall and a group of rag-tag runners, Sherman turned out to be an inspirational animal, a donkey with the heart of a hero.

So, what does Donkey Sunday teach us about being a person who carries Jesus in the world? That's our challenge, when you think about it. Although we don't act as pack animals, we carry Jesus forward in the decisions we make and in the actions we take.

Like donkeys, we make our decisions with God-given intelligence. Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, is a widely respected

physician and geneticist. He led the Human Genome Project and has been very involved in containing the coronavirus pandemic. Collins is also a deeply committed Christian who has worked hard to find harmony between science and biblical faith.

A journalist recently asked him about what he hoped Christians would understand about science. He answered, “Think of science as a gift from the Creator. The curiosity that we have been instilled with to understand how the universe works can inspire even greater awe of the Creator. This gift could hardly be a threat to God, the author of it all. Celebrate what science can teach us. Think of science as a form of worship.” Collins believes that we should all make our decisions with God-given curiosity and intelligence.

On Donkey Sunday, we should also take actions that are cooperative, not adversarial. This means working alongside our neighbors to serve a world in need, without constantly competing for resources, power or influence. Now it is certainly true that we should be committed to the foundations of our faith, holding fast to our belief that Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.” We’ll be remembering this line from the Apostles’ Creed as we make our way through Holy Week.

But being committed is not the same as being stubborn. We can work alongside people of different faiths, as well as people of no faith, to feed the hungry. A Christian named Greg Damhorst tells the story of a campus event in which he packaged meals for Haiti. The event was planned by an evangelical Christian, a Catholic, a Buddhist, a Hindu, and a Humanist. “In a single weekend,” he reports, “5,112 volunteers from every walk of life, faith and philosophical tradition passed through that site to lend a hand. In less than 12 hours, 1,012,640 meals were packaged for shipment to Haiti where they were protected by the 82nd Airborne and distributed by Salvation Army humanitarian workers.”

The event was a story “of coming together,” he writes, “a story of cooperation ... a story of interfaith work.” No one felt the need to debate the Apostles’ Creed.

Finally, we serve our Lord as people with God-given nobility. Like the donkey who carried Jesus, we can walk through the world with confidence and grace. “You are a chosen race,” said Peter in his first letter, “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.” As God’s royal people, you should hold your heads high and never feel that you are second-class citizens in this world. But this standing is not intended to make you feel superior to others. Instead, it is a status designed for service, “in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

Intelligent, cooperative, noble. That’s the character of the heroic donkey. And also the qualities of Christians who want to carry Jesus forward in what they think, do, and say. Amen.

Closing Hymn: “Ride On, Ride on in Majesty”

Winchester New

Ride on! ride on in majesty!
Hark! all the tribes hosanna cry;
O Savior meek, pursue thy road

with palms and scattered garments strowed.

Ride on! ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die;
O Christ, thy triumphs now begin
o'er captive death and conquered sin.

Ride on! ride on in majesty!
The angel-squadrons of the sky
look down with sad and wondering eyes
to see the approaching sacrifice.

Ride on! ride on in majesty!
Thy last and fiercest strife is nigh;
the Father on his sapphire throne
expects his own anointed Son.

Ride on! ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die;
bow thy meek head to mortal pain,
then take, O God, thy power, and reign.

Benediction:

My friends, go forth from this place in joy, praising God for his gift of enduring love. Lift high the palm branches of our faith, waving them in thanksgiving for the steadfastness of a loving God who is with us always, even as we travel our own roads to Jerusalem. Amen.

Postlude: Improvisation on *Victamae Paschali Laudes* Owen Alslott

INVITATION

As we celebrate and commemorate this Holy Week with a special service on Maundy Thursday and our Easter Morning Service to celebrate the Risen Christ, you are invited to share these services with your families and friends.

The Sanctuary will be decorated to reflect the joyful and reflective nature and moments of these services. Please consider making a special gift towards the costs of creating these special moments.

PRAYER LIST

Jacob Allen - Deployed of the Middle East

Amy Belli

Carolyn Barney

Jack Brigham

Becky Colwell

Maureen Daoust

Rebecca Driscoll

David Dufour

Diana Escarbie

Cathy Fontaine

Chuck Funk

Bob and Pat Goguen

Linda Haas

Douglas Hanks

John Hanks, Jr.

Linda Hurd

Tom Kazanjian

Sarah Kee

Colin Lajoie

Bob and Doris Lane

Diane Lane Cormier

Linda Long

Lorraine Michaud

Audrey Painchaud

Maria Piazza

Emma Pollice

Melanie Pouliot

Jackie Reiss

Del Sampson

Elwin Shepard

Ron Smith

The Staples Family

Diane Staples

Carole Ann Sumner and Henry

Donna Thorne

Daniel Tousignant

Marilyn Wales

Mary Wayman

All who are experiencing difficult times and situations

All who are lonely or depressed

All who are personally dealing with the affects of the COVID-19 Virus

Our Governmental Leaders

*The palms for this morning are given in memory of
Greta Greenough by the children of Rollstone Church.*