

Community Presbyterian Church  
Cedar City, Utah  
Pastor John Guthrie

Psalm 118.1-2, 19-29, Philippians 2:5-11, Matthew 21.1-11  
“Hosanna”

A man drove his car into a ditch when out driving on a country road. Luckily, a local farmer came was passing by with a great, strong donkey, whose name happened to be Dobbin.

He hitched Dobbin up to the car and shouted loudly, 'Pull, Dolly, pull!' Dobbin didn't move one inch. Then the farmer yelled, 'Pull, Robbie, pull.' Still Dobbin failed to respond. Once more the farmer commanded in a stentorian voice, 'Pull, Ringo, pull.' Again - nothing.

Then the farmer nonchalantly and quietly muttered, 'Pull, Dobbin, pull.' Immediately the donkey easily dragged the car out of the ditch. The errant driver was very appreciative but also very curious. He asked the farmer why he called his donkey by a different name three times.

The farmer whispered by way of reply, 'Oh, Dobbin is blind and if he thought he was the only one pulling, he wouldn't even try.'

Here we are at Palm Sunday, once again. The date for Easter in western churches is almost (but not quite) set as the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox. In actuality, it's a little more complicated than that. Did you notice the full moon last night?

In the old days Palm Sunday used to be simply Palm Sunday. In recent years astute observers of churches that pay attention to the liturgical calendar have noticed that most church-goers typically will leap from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday without attending any of the midweek services offered by their churches. That means they leap from the joy of the triumphal entry to the celebration of the resurrection without journeying with Jesus through the agony in the garden, the humiliation of the monkey trials, the pain of his torture, and the apparent defeat of his death.

So these churches, more or less in unison, changed the name of the Sunday before Easter to Palm/Passion Sunday, and there are alternative scripture readings for this day that carry the hearers through all of the events just mentioned.

I remain a traditionalist, and believe that on Palm Sunday we should celebrate the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, leaving Maundy Thursday and Good Friday of this week to remember the passion of Jesus. And that's why encourage you strongly to attend those services of worship. You will find your celebration of Easter ever so richer and more joyous if you pass with us through these worship services at midweek.

As Jesus and his disciples approach Jerusalem a few days before the Passover Feast,

they came to a place called Bethphage on the Mount of Olives on the east side of Jerusalem. From this mountain you can see the entirety of Jerusalem. Jesus tells two of his disciples to go into a nearby village and to bring back a donkey and a colt, probably the foal of that donkey. Matthew notes that Jesus riding a donkey as he enters Jerusalem fulfills a prophetic prediction from Zechariah.

The disciples go and find the donkey and her colt. Jesus obviously cannot sit on both of them, so he probably rides the donkey with her colt trailing behind. Then he rides down the side of the Mount of Olives and back up the side Mount Zion, through one of the gates of Jerusalem. Matthew says a very large crowd greets Jesus as he enters the city, casting their cloaks in front of him and spreading branches on the road.

The crowd accompanies Jesus into the city shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Matthew records that the whole city is in turmoil because of this man entering their city on a donkey. "Who is this?" some ask. Some reply, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

You have certainly heard before that when Zechariah prophesies a king coming to the people of Israel, riding on the back of a donkey, he is telling them that the kind they expect is not a great warrior, but rather one who comes bringing peace. Indeed, in that same passage, Zechariah writes, "He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations." Obviously the Jews who were looking for a Messiah to drive the Romans out of Judea had overlooked this particular passage of scripture.

The crowd shouts "Hosanna," which means "Please save us!" or "Save us, we pray!" The crowd calls Jesus the Son of David, a traditional title for the expected Messiah. They quote psalm 118, from which we read this morning: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Matthew says the entire city is in turmoil. The word he actually uses is the same word he uses in chapter 27 to describe the shaking of the earth when Jesus dies on the cross and when the stone is rolled away from his tomb: the city is not only in turmoil, it is as if it is shaken by an earthquake.

I may have shared with you last year a speculation on the part of some biblical scholars that there were actually two triumphant processions on that day. We can't really know for sure, but their theory is at least plausible. The other triumphant entry would be that of Pontius Pilate, entering the city from the other side, the west side, as he travelled from the Roman provincial headquarters in Caesarea Maritima, on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

These scholars speculate that Pilate travelled to Jerusalem every year at Passover, with

cavalry and infantry in order to reinforce the troops assigned to the city. Some think the population of the city may have been about 40,000 around 30 AD, but during the Feast of Unleavened Bread and Passover, as many as 200,000 people may have traveled to Jerusalem. You can probably imagine how nervous the Romans would be over so many Jews being packed into the city in order to celebrate their most holy religious feast.

Thus the speculation that Pilate, the prefect of Judea, would travel to the city with perhaps thousands of troops in order to make sure that the city remained peaceful. And if he made his own entry each year, you can be sure it was a glorious and resplendent entry, with trumpets and cavalry and infantry all dressed out, and he probably riding a strong and noble steed.

The irony is pretty obvious. The warrior enters the city from the west, riding a mighty horse. The Prince of Peace enters from the east, riding a donkey.

Jesus throughout the gospels is very careful with the ways by which he reveals himself to people. In fact, only in the Gospel of John does he make a practice of stating flat out that he is the Messiah. In the other gospels, he only rarely intimates his true identity. And you never find him standing up in the temple or a synagogue and shouting to the crowd, "I am the Messiah!"

In keeping with that soft and unpretentious character, he deliberately chooses a donkey as his ride into town, so that Zechariah's prophecy may be fulfilled. It's as if he is saying to the people of the city, "Here I am. Do you recognize me?"

I wonder what the disciples were thinking and feeling that day. Jesus had made a deliberate point in the days leading up to this one, that he was going to suffer and die. In the first of those sayings, in chapter 16, Matthew writes this: "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." Matthew records two other instances in which Jesus delivers the same message to his followers, much to their consternation and distress.

But look! Here he is entering the city to the accolades of a great crowd! Maybe he was wrong. Maybe things will go well after all. In fact, maybe he will assume the role of the Messiah they are really hoping for, along with all of their people.

Within a few days they will know that their hope is in vain. Their teacher will be arrested, tried, tortured, crucified, and dead. Just as he had been telling them.

What do we learn from the events of that day? We receive another bit of evidence from Matthew's hand, that this prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee is the Messiah of the Jews. In chapter one, verse one Matthew writes, "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David..." From the very beginning Matthew has been showing his readers that this Jesus is the one.

We learn that the Kingdom of Heaven, which Jesus speaks about so often in Matthew, is a kingdom of peace. He rides into town on a donkey, and he comes not to conquer, but to die.

And we remember that the adoring crowds disappear pretty quickly. In fact, of all the accounts we have of Jesus’ activities in the city in the days that follow, the crowds reassemble again only at the command of the religious authorities, to demand from Pilate his crucifixion.

If we are honest with ourselves, we recognize ourselves in that crowd. We can find many reasons to abandon him and his demands on our lives. We can find reasons not to pick up and carry our own crosses. We can find reasons not to love others, especially those here in our own fellowship. We find reasons.

But he is still the Son of David, the one who comes in the name of the Lord. The one who calls us to follow and to love others. Hosanna! Save us, we pray, Son of David.