

Palm Sunday
March 28, 2021
“*The Clown King*”

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 ~ Philippians 2:5-11 ~ Mark 11:1-11

In her wonderful autobiography *An American Childhood*, Annie Dillard fondly recalls her Sunday School days in her parents’ mainline Protestant church. She notes of her introduction to the Bible that, “*The Bible’s was an unlikely, movie-set world alongside our world. Light-shot and translucent in the pallid Sunday-school watercolors on the walls, stormy and opaque in the dense and staggering texts they read us placidly, week after week, this world interleaved our waking world like a dream.*” Although my first memories of biblical story telling are of catechism classes in my parochial school in Midland, Texas, Dillard’s narrative resonates with me.

For the longest time, the way I read the stories of Jesus ... including his final, “triumphal” entry into Jerusalem ... was shaped, if not determined, by images of my childhood and early adolescence. Jesus was a kind, quiet, and exceedingly humble man who rode into town on a colt ... perhaps so as not to appear too intrusive. He loved children and animals, and almost everyone loved him. But he was grossly misunderstood and ended up being crucified by some bad men who felt threatened by him. The words used to describe Jesus were words like zealous, compassionate, somber, and gentle. But no one even hinted that Jesus had a sense of humor. Comedic? Ironic? Sarcastic? No. The Jesus I was raised on was far too serious a man to bother with any incarnation of humor.

When I was young, Palm Sundays had a cheery warmth about them. I’d feel quite happy when I waved my palm branches down the center aisle of my church sanctuary. Happy to know that after years of obscurity, ridicule, and caution, Jesus enjoyed a fleeting but heartfelt outpouring of praise from his followers. Happy that the Messiah caught a glimpse of the adoration which was his birthright.

If someone had told me back then that the Triumphal Entry was a joke, and that the jokester was Jesus, I would have been offended. But according to New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, the Triumphal Entry was *not* a spontaneous event. Jesus was not the passive recipient of impromptu adoration. Though worship might have happened, it was not the point.

Rather, Jesus’ parade-by-donkey was a staged joke. It was an act of political theater ... an anti-imperial demonstration designed to mock the obscene pomp and circumstance of Rome.

In their compelling book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Last Days in Jerusalem*, Borg and Crossan argue that two processions entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday ... that Jesus' was not the only Triumphal Entry.

Every year, the Roman governor of Judea would ride up to Jerusalem from his coastal residence in the west. Why? To be present in the city for Passover ... the Jewish festival that swelled Jerusalem's population from its usual 50,000 to at least 200,000.

The governor would come in all of his imperial majesty to remind the Jewish pilgrims that Rome was in charge. The Jews could commemorate an ancient victory against Egypt if they wanted to. But real, present-day resistance (if anyone was daring to consider it) was futile.

Here is Borg and Crossan's description of Pontius Pilate's imperial procession: "A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful."

It's important to remember that according to Roman imperial belief, the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome; he was the Son of God. For the empire's Jewish subjects, Pilate's procession signaled more than a military threat. It was the embodiment of a rival theology. It was heresy on horseback.

This is the background, Borg and Crossan posit, against which we need to frame the Triumphal Entry of Jesus. That Jesus planned a counter-procession is clear from Mark's account of the event. Jesus knew he was going to enter the city on the back of a donkey ... he had already made arrangements to procure one. One that had never been ridden before. Could that also be a statement? Was Jesus showing that they should be aware that something new was coming down the road?

As Pilate clanged and crashed his imperial way into Jerusalem from the west, Jesus approached from the east, looking (by contrast) ragtag and absurd. His was the procession of the ridiculous, the powerless, the explicitly vulnerable. As Borg and Crossan remark, "What we often call the triumphal entry was actually an anti-imperial, anti-triumphal one, a deliberate lampoon of the conquering emperor entering a city on horseback through gates opened in abject submission."

Elsewhere, Crossan notes that Jesus rode "the most unthreatening, most un-military mount imaginable: a female nursing donkey with her little colt trotting along beside her."

In fact, Jesus was drawing on the rich, prophetic symbolism of the Jewish Bible in his choice of mount. The prophet Zechariah predicted the ride of a king "on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9)

He would be the nonviolent king who would "command peace to the nations." That was certainly new!

I have no idea ... and the Gospel writers don't tell us ... whether anyone in the crowd that day understood what Jesus was doing. Did they get the joke? Did they catch the subversive nature of their king's donkey ride? He was telling them that his kingship, his Way, was a new and uncharted one ... a risky one. Did they hear him?

I suspect they did not. The disciples should have known what was happening. Jesus had already laid it out for them. But they still did not comprehend what he had said. At this moment, the crowd (small though it might have been) sees him as a king, as one who will get them out of where they are. "Hosanna", "the Coming One", the one who restores Jerusalem. He enters. This is the moment. He goes toward the temple. This is it! And then he turns and goes to Bethany. The parade fizzles and the people turn back to their lives. What they didn't recognize is that Jesus brought them something that they had never had before—peace, truth, justice, and love. What they didn't recognize is that Jesus had indeed come to restore them ... *not* to what was ... but to what should have been all along.

Perhaps they missed the irony because they were ripe for revolution. Here is Jesus in the bustling capital city. He is no longer in the villages and open country of his home. They wanted ... and expected ... something world-altering. An ending-to-the-story worthy of their worship, their fervor, their dusty cloaks-on-the-road.

What they got instead was a parade of misfits. A comic donkey-ride. A dangerous joke. As New Testament scholar, N.T Wright puts it, what they got was a mismatch between their outsized expectations ... and God's small answer.

Which raises an interesting question. What did Jesus accomplish on Palm Sunday? Did a Roman officer from the "real" procession trot over to check out the disturbance in the east? If so, what did he make of the Clown King? Did he turn his stallion around quickly to whisper something ominous in Pilate's ear?

I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that Jesus' political joke hastened his crucifixion. He was no fool; he knew exactly what it would cost him to spit in Rome's face. Like all good comedians, he understood that real humor is in fact a very serious business ... at its best, it does more than entertain. It points unflinchingly at truth ... the kinds of truth we would rather not see. The kinds of truth we will *kill* not to see.

For those of us who struggle to reconcile the role of God's will in the death of Jesus, this story offers a helpful but troubling clue ... it *was* the will of God that Jesus declare the coming of God's

kingdom. A kingdom of peace, a kingdom of justice, a kingdom of radical and universal freedom. A kingdom dramatically unlike the oppressive empire Jesus challenged on Palm Sunday.

So why did Jesus die? He died because he unflinchingly fulfilled the will of God. He died because he exposed the ungracious sham at the heart of all human kingdoms ... holding up a mirror that shocked his contemporaries at the deepest levels of their imaginations. Even when he knew that his vocation would cost him his life, he set his face "like flint" towards Jerusalem. Even when he knew who would get the last laugh at Calvary, he mounted a donkey and took Rome for a ride.

Two processions. Two kingdoms. Two parades into Jerusalem. Stallion or donkey? Armor or humor? Emperor or clown? Which will I choose?

The question troubles me because I would rather make pretty palm crosses and sing "Hosanna." The question troubles me because the real choices are much harder than I thought they would be. On Palm Sunday, Jesus invites us to join his subversive counter-procession into all the world. But he calls us not to just any subversion ... or subversion for its own sake ... or to some new and improved political agenda. Rather, Christian subversion takes as its model Jesus himself, "who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross." The joke is over; Jesus' choice cost him everything. The choice is ours, but we dare not join his parade too casually.

It is always tempting at this point to rush headlong toward the resurrection, to say "Yes, Jesus was arrested and beaten and eventually killed, but "spoiler alert," God raised him from the dead and it's all OK." And of course, our haste is understandable. The cross is not exactly a pleasant thing to contemplate. But Jesus challenges us to wait a minute ... to take time to consider the days leading to his arrest and crucifixion. He reminds us that his death was no accident ... but rather something provoked by his faithful embodiment of the Gospel. He reminds us that the Kingdom entered history not only in his resurrection, but also as he remained faithful even as he was arrested and lied about and beaten and crucified. He invites us this week to join him as he enters Jerusalem, preparing once again to empty himself, and in so doing making present the peaceable Kingdom of God.

May we pray?

Merciful God, as we enter Holy Week turn our hearts again to Jerusalem ... to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus ... so that we can recognize the contrast of what Jesus came to offer and what the world gives. Help us turn our hearts and minds towards doing your will, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.