Donkey King

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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March 25, 2018
I love March Madness. Typically, I don’t watch sports Saturday evening since it serves to stimulate me. I already sleep lighter Saturday night before my Sunday duties. Last night, I checked my phone with ten minutes to go in the Loyola-Chicago/Kansas State game. Loyola was up by twelve with ten minutes to go. I just had to watch this Cinderella story in the making.

Who was the top-trending topic on Twitter last night? Sister Jean! This 98-year-old nun, wheelchair bound, is chaplain to the 11th seed team from Loyola-Chicago. She has been their chaplain for the last quarter century. She may be the only sister with a bobble-head to her name. One reporter called her “America’s grandma.” She possesses a deep faith and a great sense of humor. One reporter asked her about how she was handling the national fame. “Really, I must correct you, international [fame].” Another reporter asked her last night what she was giving up for Lent this year. She was quick to quip, “Losing.”

I love Cinderella stories. In our jaded, cynical world, Sister Jean may be God’s Cinderella story this year.

Sister Jean gets up every morning at 5:00 am to pray and read Scripture. I don’t know whether she was up at 5:00 am today, but when she rises, no doubt she will read this Palm Sunday text. Virtually every church in America will be focusing on this Palm Sunday story. While Matthew, Mark and John make pointed reference to the palm branches...
spread in Jesus’ pathway, Luke shines the spotlight on the donkey Jesus rides into town.

Luke is fascinated with the details of this donkey. Incidentally, Jesus must have had supernatural insight into the whereabouts of this donkey or has made prior arrangements. Jesus tells his disciples where to find this donkey. He tells them what to do when they find this donkey and what to say when questioned about it. I count no fewer than five references to this donkey tied and untied. First, Jesus tells his disciples to go into the village ahead of them and find the colt tied there (19:30). Second, he informs them, “Untie it and bring it here” (19:30). Third, he tells them, “If anyone asks you why you are untying it say, “The Lord needs it” (19:31). Fourth, “As they are untying the colt,” the owners ask them (fifth), “Why are you untying the colt?” (19:33).

Everything else about this story seems secondary to this matter of the donkey Jesus rides on into Jerusalem. The two disciples who fetch the donkey are left unnamed; so is the village where Jesus sends them. Every other time the disciples do something significant they are identified by name.

If Chris and I travel on an exotic cruise, you might expect us to chronicle the interesting places we visited. Instead, we blab on about the car we rented. I tell you its make and
model. I talk about why we choose a midsize over a luxury vehicle. I tell you why we declined the insurance and returned it with a full tank of gas. You are thinking, why is he telling me these things? I mean, who really cares?

Why does Luke spend so much time on the seemingly insignificant detail of the donkey Jesus rides into Jerusalem? Perhaps it is not insignificant after all. Jesus’ decision to ride a donkey into Jerusalem becomes highly symbolic of his mission.

Five hundred years before the coming of Jesus, Zechariah prophecies about a future king who will ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. “Rejoice, greatly, daughter of Zion. Shout, daughter of Jerusalem. See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem and the battle bows will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His reign will extend from sea to sea” (Zechariah 9:9-10). Matthew and Mark are hardly subtle about it. They cite chapter and verse from Zechariah to underscore this feature of the Palm Sunday story.

Donkeys serve peaceful purposes in Scripture. Cavalry ride horses into battle. No one riding a donkey is looking to pick a fight.
The people spread their coats and branches on the road Jesus travels. They cry out, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory to God in the highest” (19:36).

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd order Jesus to silence his boisterous disciples. “I tell you,” Jesus says, “If my disciples keep quiet, these stones will cry out” (19:40). It’s no use trying to muzzle his disciples. If they remain silent, inanimate objects will take up the chorus.

Suddenly, the celebratory mood turns on a dime. As Jesus crests the Mount of Olives and recognizes Jerusalem in the distance, he begins to weep: “O Jerusalem, if only you have known the things that make for peace” (19:41-42). There is irony in the name Jerusalem. It literally translates Jeru (city) of salem (peace).

There are, in actuality, two processionals during this time of Passover. Luke recounts Jesus’ triumphal entry from the east. What he does not tell us is that Pontius Pilate enters Jerusalem from the west at the same time, en route from his northern palace at Caesarea, a coastal city, new and modern. You can picture the scene with swords glistening in the sun, the thunder of cavalry and chariots with Pilate bringing up the rear, riding his white stallion. Pilate intends this military processional to quell any notion of an uprising during Passover when
feelings of nationalism are riding high. What a marked contrast to Jesus riding a donkey accompanied with a rag-tag assortment of people.

So, what difference does this sermon make in my life? I have two observations from this Lukan passage. My first observation has to do with Jesus and the second has to do with us as his followers.

First, an observation about Jesus. Let me correct a long-standing misimpression people have of Jesus. We tend to view him as a helpless victim of circumstances. After all, Judas, one of the Twelve betrays him. Political and religious leaders conspire to arrest him on trumped-up charges. Yet a much different picture emerges in Luke’s gospel. Jesus is clearly in charge. He knows what he is doing. He orchestrates the events that lead-up to his entry into Jerusalem.

Go back to Luke 9. After Jesus predicts his looming arrest and mock trial, Luke tells us, “Jesus sets his face for Jerusalem” (9:51). He refuses to back down from the confrontation that awaits him in Jerusalem. Later, in Luke 18, as Jesus approaches the holy city, he announces in no uncertain terms, “We are going up to Jerusalem and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled” (18:31).

Jesus tells his disciples where to find the donkey. He elects to ride it down the main street in town. He willingly accepts
the adulation of the crowd. Earlier, he ordered his disciples to keep quiet about his Messianic mission (9:21). Not now! If his disciples remain silent, the very stones will cry out.

Why does Jesus wait for this moment to publicly declare his Messianic mission? Because Jesus wants to announce his coming on his own terms. He does not come with swords and warhorses. Riding a donkey becomes emblematic of his peaceful mission.

Even the young donkey seems to recognize his rider. Luke tells us this colt has never been ridden. You cannot ride an animal before it is broken, especially riding through a yelling crowd. Could it be that this donkey recognizes its real owner?

There is an interesting play on words in this passage. Jesus tells his disciples if anyone should question them, they should say, “The Lord [Kurios] needs it” (19:31). When the disciples find the donkey and attempt to untie it, its owners [kurioi] ask, “Why are you untying it?” (19:33). The disciples answer as directed, “The Lord [Kurios] needs it.” In the Greek, Kurios refers to master or owner. While the donkey’s masters enjoy temporary ownership, Jesus is master and owner in the ultimate sense. He is the rightful owner of this donkey and everything else, for that matter.

People want Jesus to lead a rebellion to overthrow Roman occupation. Instead, he willingly lays down his life for them. Jesus goes to the cross as God’s representative to heal the breach caused by human sin. He does not come as a muscle-Messiah with a show of force. He lays down his power and dies in order that we might live.
My second observation concerns us as followers of Jesus. This Palm Sunday story functions as a parable acted out in real life. It dramatizes the mismatch between what we think we need and what Jesus has offer. We go to Jesus and say in so many words, “This is what I want you to do for me.” We have our hearts set on what we want him to do for us.

Steve Hayner, former president of a campus ministry called InterVarsity and later Columbia Seminary in Georgia, died two years ago of pancreatic cancer. While under hospice care, in a blog post he addressed the fact that so many people were praying for him, yet his health continued to worsen. He wrote, “God is committed to my ultimate healing. Being cured of my cancer may or may not be a part of that healing.” Later he concluded, “Life is about more than physical health. More important than God’s work in us is God’s presence within us, empowering and sustaining us for whatever might be God’s call on our lives today.”

We want Jesus’ help in times of trouble. We pray to him whenever we are in a bind. We tell him in so many words, “Jesus come down and make things better.” He says, “Go in the strength I supply.” Jesus is not our genie in a bottle, a wish-upon-a-star deity. He does not come on our terms. He comes to redeem and save.

I said in a sermon a few years ago, “God gives us what we would have asked if we knew everything He knew.” Jesus gives us everything we need, not everything we want. Can I let go of how I think Jesus ought to work in my life? Can I let go of my timetable and agenda? Can I let go of my preconceived notions of how my life ought to play out?

Can you do that today? Can you let go and trust God?