

April 5, 2020 Palm Sun. Zoom Service

“Riding on a Donkey”

Zechariah 8:3-8. Mark 11:1-11

First United Church of Arvada

Rev. Karin Kilpatric

A young city dweller once went to visit an old man who lived on a mountain. That evening as the two stood silently together looking up at the vast canopy of sky above them, the stars seemed to the young man to be mighty glowing orbs which appeared frighteningly close. Filled with awe at the sight, the young man was finally moved to break the silence between them with what he supposed to be humility, asking, “Doesn’t this magnificence make you feel insignificant?” The old man, rather amused by the younger’s fuzzy notion of humility, replied simply, “Oh no, only profoundly grateful to be included in such a universe.”

This morning we read a traditional Gospel passage for Palm Sunday. When the crowd heard Jesus was coming into Jerusalem, the people grabbed palm branches, waved them, and ran to meet him. The palm branch was the traditional symbol of military triumph and victory. But the man they were hailing that day did not come in triumph as a warring leader- but in peace and humility -choosing to ride upon the back of a humble donkey and a borrowed one at that.

The custom of the time was to hold processional liturgies of thanksgiving for military victory. These processions would begin outside the temple and continue inside. We see this in the triumphant language of the Old Testament prophet, Zechariah, “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he.” The Prophet/Priest, Zechariah, brought spoke God’s word to the Jewish remnant who had just returned from exile in Babylon. Zechariah offered encouragement to the struggling Israelites who were trying to rebuild their temple. He spoke of a God who longed to renew a covenant relationship with his people -- a God of grace, love and forgiveness. Zechariah’s declaration, “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he” suddenly takes a very different

turn and presents a contrasting image when he concludes “humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

We should remember that Jesus lived in a tense political climate. He used the heightened atmosphere of unrest with its intense desire among the people for a messiah who could rescue them from the oppressive occupying forces, to communicate his message about a different kingdom—a kingdom not of war but of peace, on earth. Keep in mind that Hosanna doesn’t translate “Praise You,” as we might assume, but rather, “Save Us.” Jesus was using the people’s longing for someone to offer them political liberation, in order to teach them about the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God – a kingdom that does not conform to worldly rules and norms, a kingdom that sets all of this on its head.

So, Jesus borrows a donkey, a humble beast of burden to ride into Jerusalem. This was, no doubt, his way of presenting a challenge both to the political oppressors *and* to the enthusiastic crowds who gathered for the spectacle, a crowd whose expectations had begun to pile up on him. Of course, both groups would be disappointed with Jesus’ response that day. The coming Kingdom of God did not, and never will, conform to anyone’s culturally determined hopes and expectations.

Jesus entered Jerusalem, the religious center, the very heart of the Jewish world, to lay down his last challenge to people and to change history forever. The New Order was written in the stars. There would be no choice about this. The people’s only choice was the part they wanted to play. The man on the donkey who entered the city and changed the world, symbolized not conquering might but the saving power of a suffering servant. The authorities were enraged. And they have been ever since. Of course, they knew they had to get rid of Jesus before any of these uncontrollable ideas could take root in their world.

Crowds are easily swayed. Just a week after waving their branches in adulation, the people in that crowd realized that Jesus' objectives were not in sync with theirs, and their "Hosannas" became "Crucify him!" We have all lived long enough to see public opinion turn on a single event. Memories are short and collective feelings have shallow roots. Even collective principles seem to have shallow roots. Religious principles are not exempt from this shallowness. When our values become only knee-jerk, external reflections of our culture or our religion, when one is satisfied to recite "group-speak" rather than carrying his suffering by internalizing hard learned life lessons which become the fruits of a courageous spiritual life, then our psychological insight and moral awareness are dimmed almost to extinction. We develop mindless loyalty to opinion leaders or to people in positions of authority, aligning with one by being in opposition to another, trying to find meaning by dividing into them and us. The crowd in Jerusalem was not monstrous but full of people, just like us. They were decent, law abiding people but people who proved to be weak of soul and unprepared for the day at hand. When Pilate put Jesus before the crowd only a few days later—beaten and bruised and certainly not looking the kingly part-- their weak collective conviction was shattered. Many of them probably didn't even join in the shout, "Crucify him," but in their silence, they, too, were complicit in his death. They silently made their choice.

Yes, most of us have a very fuzzing notion of humility. Humility is not shame or a put down of the self. Humility is not false modesty or an underestimation of one's talents, abilities, capacities, or worth. Humility evokes wonder at the profound mystery and beauty of love, nature, prayer, science, compassionate community and the creative genius in art, poetry and music. Perceiving the vastness of the universe in the starry night sky humbled the ego of the young man in our story, even as it strengthened the soul of his elder. The elder was filled not with a fear of his own deficiency, but with the power of deep gratitude. To live humbly is to recognize that vulnerability is a given of this created order and elaborate defenses against this vulnerability only lead to unhappiness and confusion. Humility is a sacred understanding that our vulnerability invites us into the presence of an inclusive and abundant God and calls us to a life of

integrity, mercy and hope-- recognizing and trusting that we are part of a spirit much larger than ourselves and into which our own spirits are folded.

Fate may decree that, for a few of us, our life star might shine a bit more brightly, but, big or small, each of us has a part to play in life's magnificent drama. As I prepared for today's message, I read one of Rev. Peter Sawtell's recent on-line Eco-Justice notes.

Rev. Sawtell is a local U.C.C. minister who is the Dir. of Eco-Justice Ministries.

Covid-19, with its damage to physical and mental health and to our economy, highlights more dramatically the changes needed for our collective future health and well-being. In his essay, Sawtell invites each of us to think about our vision of the future and the goals we see as important to shaping our nation and guiding us into coming years. Sawtell leads by example, creating his own partial list. I have abbreviated the content of this list to share with you today.

1) This pandemic has revealed profound flaws in our health care system. Millions are uninsured or underinsured. People don't know what tests and care is covered, or how to get it. Hospitals are under-supplied. A comprehensive and coordinated health care for all is essential for a compassionate and just society.

2) The crisis has highlighted even more clearly the inequality, poverty and debt of so many. Too many families spend too much for housing, others swim in a sea of debt as a few ultra-rich hold unimaginable wealth. Our vision for a just society should have decent jobs and fair wages, so that there will be dramatically fewer people on the financial edge.

3) It has shown the heightened vulnerability of small businesses vs. globalized corporations -- Businesses of all kinds are shut down or curtailed these days, but small businesses are taking the biggest hit. Restaurants and shops -- beloved by their communities and providing distinctive services -- generally have smaller reserves. Big corporations tend to have deeper pockets, a wider reach, and the capacity to expand even in adverse times. We must protect small and local enterprises.

4). We have seen how the absence of diversity hampers resilience -- A big part of our current health care crisis comes from a shortage of essential supplies. I've learned that [65% of the world's medical gloves come from Malaysia](#), which creates a choke point in a time of sudden demand. The shortage of face masks, again produced by a globalized industry, is tied to "just in time" supply chains. A healthy society, just like a healthy ecosystem, must have diversity and resilience.

5). We must have respect for science -- Experts have been predicting a severe pandemic for years. The steps necessary to contain a global epidemic have been

known, as have the need for stockpiles of supplies. A secure society will take seriously the findings of science and the knowledge of experts.

6) The last few weeks have shown the gift of communities, and of the social good.

We've been moved by quarantined Italians singing from their balconies, and by signs saying thanks to grocery store workers. Neighbors have stepped up to help neighbors. The future we want to see must include strong and vibrant communities, which minimize individualism and isolation.

Well that is one man's thoughtful list. Now is the time for all of us to meditate on what we think is important to our faith and values and what will be needed for a more humane future.

In her recent on-line Newsletter, "Brain Pickings, Maria Popova concluded, "We shape tomorrow by how we navigate our parallel potentialities for moral ruin and moral redemption today." It is important, not only for our individual spiritual lives but for the life we share with the rest of humanity on this earth; in the realm of education and vocation, the ethics of political, social and economic decision making, the way we develop and use scientific knowledge, and in the call of our churches to serve God by serving the world.

In the wake of this pandemic, may Christ's star shine its holy vision into our lives inviting each of us to welcome his life-giving light with humility as together we honor the Christ spirit by working for peace, justice and human welfare in our time.

"Hosanna! "Save us." Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."