

Palm Sunday, Year B

March 24, 2024

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH

The Liturgy of the Palms

Mark 11:1-11

The Liturgy of the Word

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalm 31:9-16

Philippians 2:5-11

Mark 14:1-15:47

I took some time this week to sit with a newly installed piece of art pulled from the archives we have here at St. Paul's. It is at least new for me. A piece called "Palm Sunday" has been installed in the hallway just outside of the narthex. I took some time with it this week to think about the events of this day. I commend its beauty to you. Take a look at it as you leave today.

Right in the middle of the piece is a colt, a donkey. And it inspired me to think about this one particular character who sometimes gets lost in the events of this day: the colt, the donkey. The donkey, both in our time as well as in ancient Palestine, was not an animal with a particular regal reputation. The animal, did however, play an important role in ancient Palestinian culture. The donkey was primarily a working animal used for transporting, ploughing, and generally being useful to humans. In a few words, the donkey was ordinary, nothing special, common.

We read in today's Gospel for Palm Sunday that Jesus sent two of his disciples ahead of him to secure a colt. But a much more appropriate animal for Jesus to mount as he entered Jerusalem triumphantly, surrounded by kingly praises would have been a

horse-the animal of combat. This means that this choice of Jesus's to get a donkey was important and intentional.

The fact that Jesus rode in on a work animal is shocking, but it can teach us so much about Jesus and the life to which he calls us. Words like humility and meekness come to mind, of course. Jesus chose not to exalt himself as king might or would have. Paul speaks to this facet of Jesus's humility in his letter to the Philippians when he says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.." Jesus did not come to conquer in might, but rather, he came, through humility, to be the peacemaker of the world.

There's something else in here that I think is important we grasp, too. Something else Jesus was always up to in his ministry was taking the ordinary and blessing it; taking the lost and finding it; taking the broken and healing it. This was no different in Jesus's choosing an ordinary, nothing-special, common donkey to be his mode of transportation into the Holy City. And in his ministry, by lifting up the lowly and making the lowly special, Jesus fulfilled a prophecy- the one of his Mother in her song when she sang, "He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has come to the help of his servant Israel, for he has remembered his promise of mercy..." God's work in Jesus was always about taking the ordinary and making it holy, giving it meaning and purpose. Jesus did this even from the cross in his dying moments by exalting the common thief next to him, giving that thief purpose even in death.

And in the most meaningful way, Jesus makes himself known to us, too, in the most common, ordinary, nothing-special elements of wine and bread. In these two most basic foodstuffs, Jesus comes to us. Just as Jesus chose a lowly donkey to deliver himself in

Jerusalem, Jesus elevates wine and bread and makes them his home so that we may live with him and he in us.

I do wonder what the colt thought as he was chosen for this important task. I can hear that poor, poor donkey reluctantly telling the two disciples that they should rather get a horse for Jesus. I can hear the horses in the stables saying that they are the ones who have been properly preened and primped for such a triumphal entry as this. And I can hear the two disciples answering back that their master specifically asked for the lowly donkey.

As we begin our journey this Holy Week toward the cross, I challenge us to be mindful of all the common and ordinary elements of the stories through which we will journey. Find meaning in the bread and wine, the water in the foot washing basin, the plants in the Garden of Gethsemane, the cock that crows, the wood of the cross, and the hard stone of the tomb. I pray that we will find this week, in these common and ordinary things, an intimate encounter with our Lord who is always about making the common holy.