

A Humble Ride

By
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from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Palm Sunday

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

¹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! ²Let Israel say, “His steadfast love endures forever.”

¹⁹Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD. ²⁰This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it. ²¹I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. ²²The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. ²³This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. ²⁴This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. ²⁵Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success! ²⁶Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD. ²⁷The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. ²⁸You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. ²⁹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ²and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’”

⁴They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” ⁶They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

⁷Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹¹Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

It would not be Palm Sunday without the processional singing of *All Glory, Laud and Honor*. Life-long church goers have happy memories of Palm Sunday, and often say it's their favorite Sunday of the year. I'm sure that's because of the palm waving, the joyful procession, the multigenerational participation, and besides, everyone loves a parade! However, we cannot do justice to the full stretch of Holy Week without also hearing the low notes of doom and gloom that lie ahead. This triumphal entry of Jesus going into Jerusalem is replete with irony as he mounts his borrowed donkey for a humble ride.

Although the melody of *All Glory Laud and Honor* may not strike those low notes, this essential hymn of the day was inspired by a stark contrast between Jesus' humble ride and a conquering ruler's grand military entrance. The text of this hymn was written by a man in a prison cell who knew well the difference between earthly, royal power and the power of Jesus *to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring!* Born in 750, Theodulph of Orleans was a leading monastic poet, writer and theologian in the early 9th century. Inspired by the benefits of his own education, he appealed to the court of Charlemagne to create a system of public education. Charlemagne named him the Bishop of Orleans, and asked him to lead early reforms in the medieval church, calling for better translations of the Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek texts, as well as clarifying the difference between appropriate adoration of sacred images on display in churches and idolatry. When Charlemagne died, this leading theologian in his court, was imprisoned by his successor. King Louis the First was threatened by his influence and suspicious of plots against his reign. The story goes that from his prison cell, Theodulph heard a grand royal procession accompanying King Louis into town, and he penned the text of *All Glory Laud and Honor*, to capture the contrast between a paranoid earthly king and the genuine Lordship of God revealed in the humility of Jesus Christ.¹

¹ Kenneth Osbeck, *101 More Hymn Stories*, p. 28

Like the history of this beloved Palm Sunday hymn, the gospel writer Mark describes this day with a strong emphasis on Jesus' humility. With four gospel accounts of Jesus' ride into Jerusalem, it is nearly impossible to listen to Mark tell the Palm Sunday story with his own theological emphasis because the church has drawn upon all the available resources in order to enlarge the drama. We borrow details from each of the gospels to elevate this day into a major Christian celebration. The gospel of Matthew contributes the children, John alone gives us the palms, and all the evangelists - except Mark - describe the pilgrimage of large crowds going into the streets of the city. Only Mark speaks of the procession going to the entrance of the city, where the crowds appear to fall away, and a singular Jesus enters Jerusalem, where he goes into the Temple alone to look around one last time before all hell breaks loose.

The first of the gospels to be written, Mark's telling is spare, more plainly told, lacking in the excesses of later gospel writers who had more time perhaps to enlarge the Messianic connections with the Hebrew scriptures and heighten the drama. But Mark is our teller this year, and I think his pointing to Jesus' humility is a good gospel word for us to hear and to heed. Because Mark draws the stark contrast between the good news of Christ-like humility and the daily news of modern day leaders who step on others as they rise to the top, who seek to expand their dominion through violence, war and oppression; who amass great wealth at the expense of the poor, and who diminish the value of human persons by exclusionary degradation. Like the medieval bishop writing a poem from his prison cell to contrast Jesus from the paranoid, suspicious king of his day, Mark describes the Palm Sunday procession in a way that drips with irony so that we are sure to see how God's power confronts the ways of the world.

In Jesus' time the people longed for the kind of conqueror who would come into town on a great stallion; a strong political leader who would vanquish the Roman occupation with power and might. Instead of a

stallion they got Jesus on a borrowed donkey. Instead of a coronation, they got a cross. Instead of a winner; they got a man who was about to lose his life. They shouted *Hosanna, God Saves*, with the hope that he would overcome the earthly power of their oppressors, and what he did instead was declare the powerlessness of that worldly power. Because his ultimate power is found in his humble ride on the back of that donkey. A donkey is used for farming; it's not a symbol of weapon or war. It is as if Jesus rode into town on a tractor instead of a tank.

When the world longs for might, and power and retribution, God gives us humility, mercy and redemption. We see this clearly in Mark's silhouette of a man whose humility is about to shatter all their expectations of a Savior, a new kind of King. So – when find ourselves in distress, in any form of oppressive crisis, and we long for God to rescue us, how do we hear this as good news? By Godly humility, Jesus joins us in everything that makes us human, including our suffering even unto death.

David Brooks' most recent book is entitled, *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*. If you are a follower of Brooks, you know he has turned his attention in recent years from a focus on conservative political and cultural commentary, to works on character formation and the moral life. This book unpacks the importance of seeing people for who they are, and helping them to feel seen. He begins with deeply personal moments from his own life when he skated by on shallow relationships that often left him lonely and isolated. But he kept at the work of writing about and better understanding people and the changing culture around us. Along the way he felt called to probe how individuals can acquire skills to create a more meaningful common life. Drawing from a wide field of psychology, philosophy, history and the arts, he summarizes the goal of this particular book writing, "There is one skill that lies at the heart of a healthy person, family, school, community organization, or

society: the ability to see someone else deeply and make them feel seen, to accurately know another person, to let others feel valued, heard and understood.” Reading the book, I had the feeling that if more of us acquired and practiced this skill, we might be better able to rise above this season of incivility, fraught with unconscious bias, racism, xenophobia, and cruelty in order to inch the culture to a more wholesome and vital civility.

At the heart of the book David Brooks talks about the importance of empathy, that ability to be a genuine friend to someone who is suffering. He tells a story of Rabbi Elliot Kukla to illustrate how empathy is born of a willingness not to fix someone else, but to humbly companion another who is suffering. Rabbi Kukla knew a woman who, because of a brain injury would sometimes fall to the floor. People would immediately rush to get her back on her feet. She told Kukla, “I think people rush to help me up because they are so uncomfortable with seeing an adult lying on the floor. But what I really need is for someone to get down on the ground with me.”²

Empathetic people know how to humble themselves. They know how to provide a kind of physical presence, as well as an emotional presence, a spiritual presence. Even if our maladies, the ups and downs of our lives may not plummet us to the floor, we know exactly what this woman means. Truth be told, to live a full and purposeful life means there will be many occasions when we are down on the floor. When some kind of oppression becomes unbearable; when the physical life begins to slow down and decline; when we are overwhelmed with grief in the face of death; when we ourselves are face to face with death; when we realize we cannot be rescued by any worldly means. When we cannot save ourselves. By God, we are seen deeply. At the far limit of human existence, here comes Jesus, on a most humble ride, joining us on the floor where we have fallen,

² David Brooks, *How to Know a Person*, p. 157.

humbled for us. In whatever suffering comes our way, Jesus is there with us. He even dies our death right there beside us. So that wherever life takes us, especially when life takes us to the scariest liminal edge, we know we are not alone. By God's humility in Jesus, we are never alone.

AMEN.