

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles

Palm Sunday – March 25, 2018

Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

John 12:12-19

FOR REFLECTION

“The entrance into Jerusalem has all the elements of the theatre of the absurd: the poor king; truth comes riding on a donkey; symbolic actions - even parading without a permit!”

~ David Kirk, *New Zealander Athlete* (b.1961)

“I believe I would rather ride a donkey than any beast in the world. He goes briskly, he puts on no airs, he is docile, though opinionated. Satan himself could not scare him, and he is convenient--very convenient. When you are tired riding you can rest your feet on the ground and let him gallop from under you.”

~ Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (1869)

Untie the Donkey

The writer of the Gospel of John loves to explain things. It's what he does.

He makes sure that we know that the disciples had no clue what was going on theologically until Jesus was dead and raised. (Hence the parentheses in the scholars' translation.)

He explains here that the crowd that has gathered for this Jesus parade is there because they heard he had raised Lazarus from the dead. They also wanted to see Lazarus for themselves. (More parentheses.)

He explains that they are shouting words from Psalm 118:25-26 – a psalm often sung at festivals.

The only gospel writer to do so, he explains that they bring PALM branches to wave and throw into the street – but he gets it wrong at this point. Palm branches are used at the festival of BOOTHS, not Passover. Oh well.

And he explains why Jesus rides in on a baby donkey – referencing the prophet Zechariah 9:9. It's a description of G-d's warrior come to the Jewish people in diaspora – to reunite and defend them from all oppressors. G-d proclaims:

8 Then I will encamp at my house as a guard,
so that no one shall march to and fro;

no oppressor shall again overrun them,

for now I have seen with my own eyes.

9 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.
10 He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the warhorse from Jerusalem;
and the battle-bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.**

He assumes that his audience already knows that this is Jesus' way of mocking the military parade of Roman soldiers on horses entering Jerusalem to keep order during the festival. (Doo Dah Parades were a thing even then.)

But he does NOT explain how he GOT the baby donkey. He just says in a perfunctory way: "Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it." No disciples explaining to the owner why Jesus needs to borrow it. Just find and use. Like he had every right to. Like he was G-d or something.

So, we can use our imaginations to understand the many metaphorical meanings of a humble king parading through the capital city on a baby beast of burden. Maren Tirabassi does just that in her poem:

Untie the Donkey

A Poem by Maren Tirabassi
Mark 11: 1-11 * 3/17/18

First untie the donkey
the one that's standing at the gate
waiting to be untied --

from some sorrow
or some guilt,
from someone else's judgment --
too young for the ride, or too old,
too much ink on the skin,
parkinsons in the hands,
pregnant in the belly.

First untie the donkey,
the one that's standing at the gate
waiting to be untied –

from some abusive relationship
or really intricate self-made knots.

This is the donkey God wants for the ride –
a burro with no documents,
or some other not-yet-ridden,
gender-outside or recovery-thin.

So first untie the donkey –
the one who wants a parade,
willing to carry joy
and a premonition of cross
at the same time,
longing for a day of song and danger
fetlock deep in palms,
and a life that will always echo,
Hosanna.

Jesus on a baby donkey is the quintessential biblical reminder that G-d is particularly interested in partnering with flawed and humble individuals when redeeming the world. Moses was an adopted child and murderer with a speech defect who freed an entire race of people from slavery. King David, poor shepherd boy and youngest child, was an adulterer and murderer who paid the price through the loss of a child – before becoming the ultimate Divinely Ordained ruler of his people. The human race was generated through two disobedient first-borns who had to be thrown out of the garden before they could be responsible enough to raise a family – and even then, raised a school shooter who killed his brother – before turning his life around.

Throughout our library of stories, redemption comes through harlots and outsiders, unwed mothers and foreigners, crazy prophets who do street theatre, poor people and drunkards – women, for heaven's sake – criminals and blind uncircumcised lepers, for sure. This baby donkey, so short Jesus' feet drag on the ground – is a reminder that no matter how broken or flawed or unprepared we are – maybe because of these cracks in our being – G-d is deeply interested in freeing us from our societal bondage – and using us for a greater purpose.

It has something to do with that over-used platitude that the quality of our life is not about our suffering but our response TO that suffering.

Malala Yousafzai, Pakistani activist for female education and the youngest Nobel Prize laureate, was shot in the head when she was 15-years-old. That may have been the end of it – but her response to that event made her a global phenomenon.

Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School students haven't just survived a school shooting, they have turned it into a movement for gun control that was unheard of six weeks ago. And they are using their media privilege to shine a light on Black Lives Matter – another much less popular youth movement.

Yesterday, more than 200,000 people attended the March for Our Lives demonstration in Washington D.C.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/march-for-our-lives-crowd-size-estimated-200000-people-attended-d-c-march/>

Police officers in Los Angeles put the early crowd estimate at least 40,000. Organizers said they anticipated as many as 200,000 people.

832 rallies were held around the world with millions in the streets.

<http://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2018/03/24/thousands-march-for-our-lives-downtown-la/>

Kids did this. Ordinary, flawed, terrified kids got millions of people to march around the world. And the New Yorker marked another aspect of their achievement:

What was most remarkable was the event's inclusiveness. In the six weeks since the young survivors of Parkland, Florida, jump-started a vibrant new movement for gun control, its leadership has managed to broaden the locus of concern beyond mass shootings at comfortable suburban schools like Marjory Stoneman Douglas, to gun violence in urban neighborhoods as well.

At a Friday night interfaith prayer vigil held at the National Cathedral, one of the most powerful speakers was the gun-control activist Lucy McBath, whose seventeen-year-old son Jordan Davis—her only child—was shot to death by a white man who'd objected to the volume of music playing from Davis's car in a gas-station parking lot. The speakers at Saturday's rally included students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas, who talked about the sudden intrusion of terror into their lives on February 14th, and **young black and Latino activists from Chicago and Los Angeles who talked about the threats they faced from guns every day.**

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-extraordinary-inclusiveness-of-the-march-for-our-lives>

The donkey has been untied. The kids are loose. Non-binary folks have a voice and new language for us to learn. Undocumented DREAMers are pushing back. The NRA is losing ground. Special Counsel Robert Mueller is gaining ground. And if our president isn't impeached by the end of the year, I'll be flabbergasted.

The donkey has been untied.

Because of our weaknesses, G-d had a special purpose for us.

Time to plod our way through the streets

with Jesus on our backs and change the world.

Let's go!

John 12:12-19

12 The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. 13 So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord - the King of Israel!"

14 Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: 15 "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

(16 His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.) 17 So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. (18 It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him.) 19 The Pharisees then said to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!'