

A Palm Sunday Sermon

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“...stepped, as he had to, forward.”

Mark 1:1-11; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

In Mary Oliver’s recent collection of poems, a book entitled *Thirst*, she reflects on this Palm Sunday story from the gospels in a poem called “The Poet Thinks about the Donkey.” Listen to how she imagines this scene.

On the outskirts of Jerusalem
the donkey waited.
Not especially brave, or filled with understanding,
he stood and waited.

How horses, turned out into the meadow,
leap with delight!
How doves, released from their cages,
clatter away, splashed with sunlight!

But the donkey, tied to a tree as usual, waited.
Then he let himself be led away.
Then he let the stranger mount.

Never had he seen such crowds!
And I wonder if he at all imagined what was to happen.
Still, he was what he had always been: small, dark, obedient.

I hope, finally, he felt brave.
I hope, finally, he loved the man who rode so lightly upon him,
as he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped, as he had to, forward.¹

As I have pondered this poem in the light of Mark’s gospel, I have been struck by the poignancy of its closing image of movement, of the donkey lifting one dusty hoof as it “stepped, as he had to, forward.” We tend to celebrate Palm Sunday as a triumphant festival day, with our parade of choirs and scores of children coming down the aisle singing “All Glory, Laud and Honor,” waving palm branches in the air. As we celebrate the triumphal entry from our side of the resurrection, we easily fail to see the dead seriousness of Jesus’ entering the city gates that day. However, the other side of Jesus’ resurrection, at the beginning of that week we have come to call “Holy” and before the Friday we have come to know as “Good,” there must have been great trepidation as the donkey, with Jesus upon him, stepped, as he had to, forward.

The church, you see, has borrowed details from all four gospel accounts to enlarge the drama of Palm Sunday. The gospel of Matthew pictures the children by saying a

very large crowd gathered around Jesus singing, and such a crowd surely would have included children. John is the one who makes mention of the palms. Luke even notes that if the crowds were silenced, the stones themselves might start singing! And all of the gospels except Mark describe the whole parade going with Jesus into the streets of Jerusalem. Only Mark stops the procession at the city gates and says that Jesus went ahead, by himself, to the Temple. The cheering is a bit muffled in Mark, the greater emphasis on humility rather than triumph, the tone here more somber, as if Jesus already knew how the sad events of the week were about to unfold.

Jesus saw where he was headed, and there could not have been a lot of joy in his own approach into Jerusalem. Three times he had told his disciples, not once but three times, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him and kill him; and after three days he will rise again” (Mark 10:33-34). Jesus knew where he was going on that humble donkey ride into town.

The religious leaders had long been after him — with his healing on the Sabbath, his amassing crowds wherever he went, his teaching of a new kind of covenant with God not based simply upon the Law, but open now to grace. Likewise, the political authorities always worried about an uprising in this heated corner of the Roman Empire, and when the crowds gathered for Passover, they were accustomed to posting armed soldiers around town and keeping the peace by fear, threat, and intimidation. Jerusalem was on the edge of chaos, and Jesus knew it when he sent two disciples ahead to fetch the colt because the Lord had need of it and would send it back when its use was over.

With the great Passover Hymn of Psalm 118 in mind, and that ragtag band of followers singing “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever....Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord....The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar....O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever,” Jesus also knew that the very symbolism of the donkey spoke volumes against the backdrop of the customary welcome of a newly arriving king. This was no triumphant warrior entering the city in a chariot pulled by strong and muscular horses, no political regent surrounded by the captives of war enslaved in chains, his heralds not soldiers leading the way before him in a great demonstration of power. Instead, here was Jesus, riding into town on a donkey in peace, quietly fulfilling an ancient prophecy. This was God’s steadfast and enduring love entering Jerusalem in person and looking beyond his imminent death toward God doing some new and unforeseen thing. As the poet imagines the donkey’s hesitant step, Jesus had to move along, his fears and concerns aside, because he knew he had set in motion the events that would do him in. And so Jesus stepped, as he had to, forward.

I have been intrigued the last couple of months by a piece of artwork on public display here in Columbia, because of how it captures a similar kind of moment. Our local folk artist, Ernest Lee, is commonly known as the Funky Chicken Man, because that is what he paints mostly, chickens. Recently, however, he has had this unusually large painting clearly visible on his corner at the intersection of Harden and Gervais streets. I would guess that many of you may have noticed it too, propped up and facing the street along with his usual folk art chickens and Palmetto palm trees. It is a painting

of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, made famous by the photograph taken just after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., 40 years ago. Most all of us have etched in our minds that familiar picture of King's friends standing on the balcony, their heads raised and their arms pointing to the window from where they heard the shots come. But Ernest Lee has painted the scene just before the shots rang out.

Looking back now, we all know that Dr. King knew he was on a dangerous road forward. In a sermon just the night before he died, he likened himself to Moses on the mountain top, saying that he himself would never get to the Promised Land. "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place," King told the crowds on the night of April 3, 1968. "But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will." As if he had known, the very next day Dr. King was shot while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. Ernest Lee's picture of the balcony of the Lorraine Motel that day is of those very same people as in that familiar photograph, yet all four are standing: Ralph Abernathy, Jesse Jackson, Andy Young and Dr. King himself upright on his feet before the bullet was fired. What the artist Ernest Lee has imagined is the moment when Dr. King was stepping, "as he had to, forward." The painting is called, "1968 in Memphis – Before."

I stopped by there recently to talk to Ernest Lee about it. I said, "You didn't paint the picture of the photograph most of us know so well; you painted the scene just before he was shot, so I'm curious why." He responded saying of King, "He was a great man. He changed the world. I just wanted to paint that moment of hope and promise while he was still alive."

That is why all the gospel writers went into such detail about this Palm Sunday procession. Looking back, they wanted to remember him while he was still alive. They wanted to remember who was there and what the weather was like and the last hymn they all sang together. Of Mark's particular account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, even when they were not yet sure exactly who he was, they looked back later knowing the cross was already being hewn on the far side of town. They realized Jesus left the crowds at the city gates, and from there he made his way alone to the Temple, then to the Mount of Olives, to Bethany, into the guest room for supper with the Twelve, on to Gethsemane, before Caiaphas and Pilate, and ultimately Golgotha. Sure, others were with him here and there, but mostly he seemed so alone. Looking back later, they wanted to hold on to the hope and promise they had come to recognize in this man, as each day during that awful last week Jesus stepped, as he had to, forward.

While you and I live without the kind of life-threatening concern that Jesus, or even Martin Luther King, Jr., faced, we too, nonetheless, find ourselves at moments in our lives when we step forward into a fearful unknown. A diagnosis comes back from the doctor, surgery is the only answer, we know we'll have to go under anesthesia, and we'll hurt when we come to, and then the long road of rehabilitation will come after that. And yet, we step, as we have to, forward. We come to a moment in our lives when we have some huge and critical thing that needs to be faced, and we'd rather not address it because it would be easier not to, and yet we know our life and wellbeing demands we deal with it, and so we step, as we have to, forward. Someone we love beyond words gets so sick, and we have the hardest time letting that person go, but because we know that the time for treatment is over and the end is coming for sure, we call in hospice care, and we step, as we have to, forward.

What Jesus was doing on the first day of that week, when the donkey took that

hesitant step forward, was above all else stepping into our lives, into the things we face, into our own suffering, even into our death. Jesus rode into town on God's behalf, a humble human being sent to see it from our side, to enter the pain, to join us in our suffering, to take upon his own body our most profound affirmation of faith that nothing, nothing in life or in death, nothing at all will be able to separate us from the steadfast and enduring love of God.

The poet, Mary Oliver, likes to imagine that the donkey "loved the man who rode so lightly upon him, as he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped, as he had to, forward." I like to imagine that, for the love of God, we do too.

Note

1. Mary Oliver, *Thirst*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2006) 44.