

<Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

When P.T. Barnum first began introducing the concept of a circus, he wanted to bring something fantastic to the everyday working people who might not have many occasions to see such fantastic sights. The rich and elite had the theater and the opera, but there was little for the common people to engage, to stimulate and excite them, to give them a hope of something to look forward to. So Barnum set out to find exotic and engaging sights and exhibits - he brought in trapeze artists, lion tamers, and acrobats of such skill they could straddle two trotting horses side-by-side. The atmosphere of the crowd was electric and vibrant! The people were excited! And the senses were engaged by what was offered!

And, according to Matthew, this was the kind of atmosphere at the gates of Jerusalem on that Sunday ahead of the Passover Festival, during which Jesus makes his entry into the holy city ahead of what would become his Passion. But we'll get to that later in the week; for now, let's stay with the crowds outside those gates. The buzz of conversation and the excitement of heightened anticipation. Since Pilate was coming in to Jerusalem ahead of the Passover Festival, the crowds gathered at the gates to try and catch a glimpse of the procession and pageantry. But what they saw, instead of royal horses and carriages, instead of military guards and formality, was...an acrobat. A man, riding two donkeys simultaneously, accompanied by a ragtag group of disciples and followers.

Yes, you heard that correctly. According to Matthew's gospel, and it is only in this gospel, Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem ahead of the Passover Festival, ahead of his passion and crucifixion, on two donkeys. Simultaneously. And Matthew is very deliberate about that.

Referring back to Zechariah, Matthew recalls the listener to the prophecy of the Messiah arriving humbly, "mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Zechariah refers to one animal, but Matthew doubles it, and has Jesus arriving on both simultaneously, much like a circus performer, because Matthew wants to be perfectly clear on just who it is that is arriving into Jerusalem. Not Herod, the king of Judea who, depraved and paranoid, was also the puppet of Rome. Not Pilate, the Roman governor and official of the region. Not any other foreign dignitary visiting on state purposes. But the Messiah. And Matthew's use of doubling in this instance reflects not only the fulfillment of prophecy but also ties Jesus to the true kingship of the people, in the lineage of David from of old. Matthew's use of Jesus arriving on two donkeys is meant to remind us, to emphasize to us, that Jesus is the only one who can claim both titles.

And honestly, there is just so much happening in all the different layers of this gospel reading - in the theology, in the culture, in the biblical history, in what it meant to the believers of the day and what it means to the believers of this day - there is so much going on that it is hard to focus our attention on just one thing. It is hard not to be

distracted. Much like going to the circus, there is almost too much to take in and not be overstimulated. So I'd like to offer one point, one perspective on which to fix our attention today, and that is fully on the servanthood of Jesus in this moment. Later in this week we will give our attention to Jesus' betrayal and arrest, his passion and his death, and then even his resurrection. But all of that is informed and supported by the manner in which he enters into this week, into this city, into this moment in history, and that is in the manner of a humble servant.

This emphatic and definitive characterization of Jesus as messiah and king is held in juxtaposition against this attitude of humility and the manner of knowingly walking to his death, the offering up of his life for the benefit and redemption of the world. The setting aside of his own desires to support those around him. Despite doubly claiming his divinity and kingship, Jesus enters as a humble servant in order to do what a servant does: to serve the people in need. A gift for the common, everyday person.

For as much as we can dive deep into the fulfilling of prophecy and the living out of kingly succession, the emphasis beyond these realities is on the servant nature and humble attitude, which flies in the face of what was anticipated. What was hoped for. What was expected. For as much as we can focus on so many things this morning, it is imperative for us to center our focus on Jesus' servanthood, and what that means for the world.

We have traveled far with Jesus in these past weeks of Lent; our own spiritual journey through this wilderness has been rich and engaging. In this season we have journeyed with Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. We have, with him, met the Samaritan woman at the well and healed the man born blind. We have been called into a new place and given a new name. And we have grieved over the presence of death and born witness to the promise and reality of resurrection. And in the midst of all of this journeying alongside Jesus in his life and ministry, we have likewise journeyed alongside each other and lived out these themes in our own lives.

We have proclaimed resurrection hope as we have celebrated the lives of loved ones and beloved members of our congregation, our community. We have opened our eyes to look for hope, and offered it to brothers and sisters in faith who face hard news and trying circumstances, who have gone through surgery and who have surgery scheduled. We have met to discuss and debate and discern and discuss some more and to pray and pray and pray, with one another and for one another. We have lived out hope for each other.

And underlying all of it, we have done all of this and more in a humble attitude, one which uplifts and honors our connections and our relationship more than our own sense of self or for recognition. Many of us have been so humble in our serving, in our ministries, in our relationships that a good portion of our congregation doesn't even know anything was done! Friends, brothers and sisters in faith, in this season of Lent and in our journey with Christ we have lived out the attitude of discipleship to be humble servants!

In almost the opposite example of a circus, which cries out and calls for your attention, I'm reminded of the character of Andy Dufresne in *The Shawshank Redemption*. And if you've never seen the movie, that's ok, but there is a moment where Andy, organizing the files of the warden, finds a record of Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro." Seeking to bring some hope and beauty into such a bleak place, knowing that no one else will know it's him and that he will certainly be punished for his actions, Andy plays the record over the prison loudspeakers. The beauty of music and culture for all to hear and receive. An offering of vibrancy for those who feel lifeless. An act of service for those who cannot repay him. Such is the character of service which is represented, also, in how Jesus enters Jerusalem. Such is the character of our church as we seek to serve one another.

But even now, I don't call our attention to this so that we might pat ourselves on the backs or heap accolades upon our shoulders. Most of us don't want that kind of attention anyway. Rather, I share this with you...I lift up this attitude lived out and this reality made tangible because now, more than ever, we will need the strength of our faith and the support of each other to face what is to come.

Our journey in this holy season is not yet complete. As Jesus rode in on the donkeys, his journey to the cross was just beginning, and his greatest challenges were yet ahead of him. Our journey with him enters its most demanding time, as we enter these days and prepare to gather with him in an upper room on Maundy Thursday, as we prepare to meet him at the cross on Good Friday, and as we go with the women to the tomb in the first light of Easter Sunday. It is all before us. And the only way to make it through to the other side is in the attitude of a humble servant, the kind that lays down their life for their friends.

Later in *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy makes an invitation to his friend Red. "You've come this far," he writes to Red in a note. "Perhaps you'll come a little bit further." We are invited, in this week, to continue the journey and go a little bit further - to the Table with Jesus and the disciples, and then to the Garden. And then to the cross, and the uncertainty of the day that will follow. And then to the tomb.

As Jesus enters Jerusalem, the crowds ask, "who is this?" As we finish our journey, we know who this is. This is the One whom we follow. This is the One who brings us to life, and life abundant in the resurrection. May we follow, humbly and lovingly, where he leads us, in this day and in all the days to come. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*