

“City Streets”
Texts: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Matthew 11:1-11
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Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” Mark 11:9

“There is in the Bible only One Holy City. Its name is Jerusalem.” Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests that the entire Bible can be understood as a meditation on the Holy City of Jerusalem, from the time Abraham made his offering there, through King David's purchase and legal entitlement of the city, to the death of Jesus, and finally to the vision of the New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation, where there will be no more crying or tears or pain, for the former things will have passed away. (1)

The City is holy, and it is holy because it is set apart by God, and for God, to be a place where God's purposes are lived out. It was down the streets of Jerusalem that God's prophets walked, calling the covenant people back to righteousness. In the Temple of Jerusalem, the priests performed their sacred duties. Pilgrims from far and wide came to the Holy City to make their sacrifices at the Temple and to observe the festivals of their faith. The week Jesus entered Jerusalem, the city was filled with Passover pilgrims. Our Psalm this morning is, in fact, a Passover Hymn written specifically for the occasion of entering Jerusalem and the Temple in Jerusalem for Passover. “Open to me the gates of righteousness,” the ancient Psalm requests, “that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.”

When one reads the 23rd Psalm, as opposed to the 118th, it would be easy to get the impression that the Almighty prefers the country to the city, that the Almighty is partial to still waters and green pastures. But the Bible is clear about this – “the special habitation of God is the city.” (2) And so it is to the city that Jesus and his devoted followers came.

For years I have been drawn to the words of George McLeod, who founded the Iona community: “I simply argue that the cross must be raised at the center of the marketplace, as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves, on the town garbage heap, in a city on a crossroads so cosmopolitan they had to write his title in Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew. It was the kind of place where cynics talk smut; soldiers gamble. That is where he died - in the city, and that is where Christians ought to be and what Christians ought to be about.”

Jesus came to the city, for there was no other place that could be the setting of the closing drama of salvation, a drama that began on the banks of the River Jordan, where Jesus received his commission and was sealed in his identity as Messiah, as Savior of sinners, Ruler of a new order called the Kingdom of God.

This last leg of the journey begins as Jesus and the others approach Jerusalem. Those who are with him, his disciples and all in his entourage, were sure that his entrance would be triumphal. And so it was. The crowds turned out, shouting their praise in the city that was the heart of Jewish worship and the seat of Roman authority. But all their expectations were not met. Surely a conquering hero would come in on – would ride on – a gallant steed, but it turned out not to be the case.

His disciples were more than ready for the hard times out on the road to be over, for the arguments with the authorities to be done with, for the murmurings and the plotting against him to come to an end. At last, Jesus would be greeted as royalty, and he ought to ride as royalty on a gallant horse, but it was not to be. At Bethany, a town only a couple of miles east of Jerusalem, Jesus instructed two of his disciples to enter the village and find an animal that had never been ridden. He knew the animal would be there, because he was, among other things, a prophet. “Find a colt, one that has never been ridden,” he said to the disciples. Why one that’s never been ridden? That tradition is probably because animals used for sacrifice in the Temple had traditionally been required to have never been ridden. What the two found in the village was not the grand stallion they had expected or wanted, not a horse with mighty legs and flying mane, but a lowly beast of burden.

One of my favorite poets Mary Oliver has written a poem entitled “The Poet Thinks about the Donkey” -
On the outskirts of Jerusalem
the donkey waited.
Not especially brave, or filled with understanding,
he stood and waited.

How horses turned 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.

We don't know the names of the two disciples who were assigned donkey patrol. I wondered though, this week, if they might really have been James and John, of whom we spoke two Sundays ago. You remember how they asked – “Let one of us sit on your right hand and one of the left, when you come into your glory.” (3)

And here they were, doing a thing that was pretty mundane. Jesus had asked them that day if they were going to be able to drink the cup that he was about to drink, to die the death that he was to die. Their minds had been on glory; his mind was on servitude. He said to them, *For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

It would seem that “humble servant” is not an ancillary Christian virtue but is the heart of the whole enterprise. Paul put it so well in his Letter to Philippians: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be exploited. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness and found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient even to the point of death – even death on the cross.”

In the Nicene Creed we say, “I believe in Jesus Christ our Lord, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God.” This exalted Lord is the humble Savior who rides into the city on a donkey. He washes his disciples’ feet. He has no need for self-glory. He gives all the glory, all the glory to God, all the time.

We follow after him, this special day, gladly singing our hosannas. But if we wish to follow him on other days, we will find ourselves doing some rather inglorious things; yet humble service was our Lord's way, and therefore, it ought to be ours as well. I am not talking about becoming a door mat and letting people walk all over you. I'm not advocating obsequiousness. I'm talking about speaking up when it might cost you to do so. I'm talking about going the extra mile and caring for your aging parents, staying up all night with a kid with a cough. I'm talking about working two jobs. I'm talking about forgiving somebody who doesn't deserve it. I'm talking about doing what needs to be done and not needing to be adored or to earn points for doing it. I think of Alexander the Great, who after he had conquered more of the world than anybody else in history, decided that if anybody was going to come into his presence, that person would be required to fall prostrate on his or her face or fall on his knees. Alexander was on top, and he wanted to make sure that nobody ever forgot it. I think of a great Atlantan, Robert Woodruff, who is known in our city for saying more than once, “It's amazing what one person can accomplish if he doesn't care who gets the credit.”

I think of the members of this church, who make sure that we have fresh, beautiful flowers on Sundays, and today, palm fronds to wave - ecologically appropriate palm fronds. I think about the Elder, who every year after this service, collects all the palms and burns them in his barbecue pit to make the ashes with which we mark our foreheads as a signal that Lent has begun and it's time to repent. I think of another Elder, one I saw a couple of weeks ago when I drove in the late afternoon into the church parking lot. He was on his knees, carefully painting a yellow strip down the center of the parking lot. Why? Because he'd been on an e-mail round, in which it was revealed that several people had

stumbled over a little rise in the pavement. I think of someone here this morning, a church member, the close friend of a teacher who teaches school in Binghamton, New York, a school just a block away from where the terrible shootings took place on Friday. I'm thinking about how this person took time to send me an e-mail to ask for prayers that I and others might offer for her friend and for her students whom she had comforted and kept in the classroom for five hours while the sounds of ambulances and police cars filled the air. It's not a gallant and noble thing to stop what you're doing and seek prayer warriors for a friend across the country, but it makes all the difference when we do humble things like that.

In the New Testament, Jesus commissions his disciples to do many really important things, topping the list is "Go therefore into the world and to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit", but there are mainly mundane things. So it is with us. We write the note; we bake the banana bread. We keep the nursery; we clean up the pews after church. We ask someone, "How are you doing?" and really wait for the answer. When we do those kinds of things, we've become the transportation, if you will, the means by which the caring spirit of Christ enters our families, our faith communities, and touches lives with the grace of Christ.

"The Poet Thinks about the Donkey" continues like this –
Then the donkey 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: dark, small, 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.

Palm Sunday has been called the Trojan Horse of the Christian Year. You recall the story in Greek mythology "in which the splendid wooden horse given by the Greeks to the Trojans turned out to have soldiers hidden inside, soldiers who slipped out, opened the gate, and let the Greek army in." (4) Today seems like such a splendid day, full of joy, but beneath the surface, opposition to Jesus is mounting; hatred and resentment are growing along the outskirts of the parade. Soon Jesus will be confronted directly by the powers and principalities, and before you know it shouts of Hosanna will be replaced by shouts of "crucify him."

There is a folk artist in Columbia, South Carolina, who is famous for painting chickens. His name is Ernest Lee. My friend, Agnes Norfleet, a pastor in Columbia, tells me that last year, Mr. Lee painted a mural that was different from anything he had ever painted before. It was a mural on a building at the

intersection of two streets, a painting of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. The timing of the painting is the moment before Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot to death, 40 years ago yesterday. Norfleet writes, "Most of us are very familiar with the picture on the balcony with his friends pointing up to the window where they think the shot had come from." (5) But Mr. Lee paints the men happy and laughing, relaxed. On the eve of his assassination, King had acknowledged he would not live a long time. He said, 'I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will.' Mr. Lee said, 'I wanted to capture that moment of hope and promise.'"

That's what Mark wanted to do today with this hopeful, promising picture of a parade, the cloaks, the leafy branches. (6) Then, there is that dark little donkey, with Jesus sitting lightly on his back, lifting "one dusty foot" and stepping forward, as he has to, stepping into the shadows. The temple will be cleansed, the fig tree cursed, but then will come the betrayal and the trials before Caiphas and Pilate, the decidedly un-triumphal walk through the city streets to Golgotha, where a cross will be raised, and Jesus nailed upon it. Think about this - the day of the parade perhaps, a carpenter was already at work on the cross. (7)

There is a darkness that shadows the parade today, but there is also enormous hope. Jesus is moving forward, ready to do what has to be done, lest the city and its citizens, the world and its inhabitants, be lost to the powers of darkness.

We step forward, too, in our own lives to face what has to be faced. (8) Sometimes it feels as if we want to raise our arms and say, "How much more do I have to take?" Often the answer is - *More*. But we will make it through. The little, determined donkey tells us we can do it. Sometimes we are asked to do a brave and sacrificial thing, and we can do it, but sometimes we don't.

I share with you a memory from my childhood in a southern town. There was a parade every year downtown that ended at the high school football field. For years, participation in the parade was limited to white people and their schools, but finally the year came when participation by children from the African-American elementary schools was to be allowed. That day, a friend and I stood along the parade route. We were seven or eight years old. Life was safer then. The floats came by. You know the type - the flatbed truck, the chicken wire, the Kleenex in every hole of the chicken wire. Not the most sophisticated parade you ever saw, but it was the most exciting thing that happened all year in our town. That year, though, when the float with the black children came into view, the crowd fell silent. The children on the float who had been smiling ceased their smiling. Some big boys standing next to my friend and me filled the silence. They filled it with terrible words, to this day, perhaps the most terrible words I've ever heard. I can only imagine what those children about my age thought when they heard them. But what was most terrible to me - it is the most terrible now as I think about it, is that I remained silent, with the rest of the crowd. I didn't turn around and say HUSH to those big boys. Yes, I was a kid, but I had a voice,

didn't I? I didn't do it because I was afraid. On the sidewalk that day, I had my own baptism into the reason Jesus had to die. He had to die for my sins, and for the sins of those boys, and for the sins of the whole terrible system of segregation. By God's grace, we are made new; but boy, it was costly grace.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem long ago. "While we were still helpless," Paul writes, "Christ died for the ungodly." For all of us he died, because we can never be worthy. We can only be made worthy.

Remember how he had insisted that the colt be one that no one had ever ridden? There had been others who had come. They had tried to take on the powers by fighting evil with evil, fire with fire – those colts, those donkeys had already been ridden. They had come promising salvation, many others had, but that hadn't happened. Only Jesus and his donkey did what needed to be done. He confronted all the powers with nothing more than unarmed love. He had no zone defense; he had no spear, no sword, no armor. He came with three things: Truth, love, and peace. (9) That's all he had, but it turns out those are the most powerful forces in the world. That's the story for Easter Sunday. Today, it is enough to watch a brave man ride a little beast into town. Our hearts ache with love and gratitude for the donkey, our role model, and gratitude to Christ, our Savior and friend. Ride on, Jesus, ride on in your majesty. Ride on.

(1) "Every City a Holy City".

(2) Ibid.

(3) Thomas G. Long, as quoted by William H. Willimon in *Pulpit Resource*, April, May, June, 2009, p.6.

(4) Fleming Rutledge, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007, p. 79.

(5) Agnes Norfleet, *Journal for Preachers*, Lent, 2009.

(6) Ibid.

(7) Ibid.

(8) Ibid.

(9) Samuel Wells, *The Christian Century*.