

BEAST OF BURDEN

Luke 19:28-40

Today is *Palm Sunday*, most recently also called *Passion Sunday*. It ushers in the most holy week in the Christian calendar as we journey with Christ all the way from the *Mount of Olives* to the cross, and beyond. It is as old a commemoration as we celebrate in the history of the Christian Church. In *The Pilgrimage of Egeria* from the late 4th century, Egeria, a highly educated Christian woman of most likely Italian origin, traveled to the Holy Land and gave this report:

“As the eleventh hour draws near, children bearing palms and branches came forth to meet the Lord, saying: ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’ The bishop and all the people rise immediately, and then everyone walks down from the top of *The Mount of Olives* with hymns and antiphons. All the children are present, including those who are not yet able to walk and therefore are carried on their parents’ shoulders.”

Although we are a far cry from *The Mount of Olives* and a bishop does not preside over our worship, we are still being led by the children “bearing Palms and branches, saying ‘Blessed is the One who comes in

the name of the Lord.” We still sing hymns and antiphons to this day, most notably “All Glory Laud and Honor (Gloria Laus),” which we just did. As the story goes, it is a hymn composed by Bishop Theodolphus in 821, who sang it while imprisoned. Apparently, the emperor, Louis the Debonair, son of Charlemagne, was so moved when he heard it that he released Theodolphus. This hymn also refers to the procession in honor of the “Redeemer King, to whom the lips of children made sweet Hosannas ring.” We still use it as our processional hymn each *Palm Sunday*.

Even a Jewish midrash, a rabbinic commentary on scripture, refers to this procession: “When the King entered the city and found all the little children gathered with song and dance and joy to appear before him, he exclaimed: ‘For your sake, I forgive everything!’ And the King joined in their celebration.”

We, too, continue to celebrate alongside our children. We, too, sing and proclaim God’s praise. We, too, worship together and wave “Palms and branches.” We eat together and we offer a petting zoo and an Easter egg hunt for the children (ok, we updated the ancient customs a little bit). This, all the while exclaiming, “Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!” And we offer donkey rides ... and the donkey’s name is—of all names—Jesus.

Speaking of the donkey ... I have been thinking about that donkey a lot. In Luke's account of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem, the donkey occupies center stage. Not the crowds, not the Palm branches, not the Hosanna's, but the donkey, which drives the story in Luke's account. By the way, did you notice that there are no crowds in Luke's version? No one shouting Hosanna? No one waving any Palm branches? The only "crowd" here is the "multitude of the disciples," all twelve of them, and a few Pharisees hanging around the edges. The reason why this donkey occupies center stage is rather simple: "The Lord needs it!"

That's interesting.... "The Lord needs it!" Why would the Lord need a donkey? Is Jesus tired from a long journey? Did he wear out his sandals? Was he too lazy to walk? I think none of the above. Instead, I think Jesus goes out of his way to make a point. A donkey is a beast of burden that does the work humans cannot do themselves. And since the disciples are really the only ones in Luke's story who spread the cloaks on the road and who cheer him on, I think what Luke is saying to the reader, meaning us: "The Lord needs YOU!" The Lord needs you and me, Jesus's contemporary disciples, to be his "beasts of burden," so to speak.

But what are we to do? If we are the Lord's donkeys, if you will, what do we carry that Jesus cannot carry? Which work do we need to accomplish

which he cannot? And are we following Mick Jagger's way, who sang with the Rolling Stones in 1978, "I'll never be your beast of burden?" Or are we following Jesus's way?

In the history of theology, we often speak about "the means of grace," about the things which make God's grace visible in the physical world. And in the Reformed tradition, of which we are a part, there are two of these: baptism and the Lord's Supper. I think that's a little meager if that's all we have to make God's grace visible in the world, if you ask me. And you know me, I like to shake things up a little bit. So here goes.

I think the writer of Luke's gospel does something radical here. He challenges you and me to be the bearers of God's grace and to make it visible in the world. To be like the donkey and do the hard lifting of carrying Jesus, meaning telling this broken world about God's grace—and not only talk about it but live it. There are a few things necessary to accomplish this.

First, we need to submit to what Jesus wants us to do. Submission is not a popular word these days in a world where everybody wants what we want whenever we want it ... preferably yesterday. To be bearers of God's grace, we need to acknowledge that God needs us. Not on our time, but on God's time. Second, we need to be aware that bearing God's grace in the

world will be costly. As the donkey carries Jesus down the road and the disciples are proclaiming “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven,” there is another parade happening on the other side of town.

It is an imperial parade in which Pontius Pilate leads his Roman soldiers with all the trappings of an imperial occupying force into Jerusalem just as the *Passover* is about to begin. He wants to make it abundantly clear who is in charge. The New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan documented this in their book “The Last Week,” which follows Jesus beginning Palm Sunday all the way to the cross. Here is Jesus on his donkey and a “multitude of twelve disciples” saying, not so much in words but in actions, “No, Pilate, you are not in charge!” Jesus’s “Palm Sunday parade,” then, is an act of political defiance which will ultimately cost him his life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the late great German Lutheran theologian, talks about the “cost of discipleship.” Bearing God’s grace in this world is not easy—it has its blessings and challenges. Yet making God’s grace visible in the world is what we are called to do—any which way we can, big or small. It is holy work. It is, dare I say, sacramental work. But this is not work that we do alone. It is work that we share with creation itself, for you

and I are not the only means of grace. Nature, is too, lest we think we are special. As we hear in Luke's account, if we fail to proclaim God's grace, "the stones will shout out."

And so, today and every day, you and I are Jesus's "beasts of burden," shouting out and praising God joyfully with a loud voice in thanksgiving for all God's great deeds of power and grace, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven."

May it be so. For you, and for me. Amen.

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