

My friend Delmer shares a story his father-in law used to tell back in the sixties, before there was cable TV and a state lottery, when everyone was more easily entertained. He says there were Super Market Races on TV in those days, sponsored by a grocery chain. They showed taped races from New York and California horse tracks on TV and the supermarkets ran specials and gave out prizes depending on which horse won. I never heard of such a thing, so it must have been regional. Maybe you North Carolina natives remember it.

Anyway, the story goes that there were two farm boys—we'll call them Bill and Jack—watching the Super Market Race after supper one night. Bill said, "I bet you five dollars horse number three wins." Jack said, "You're on!" Sure enough, number three won. Bill grinned and said, "Aw, I can't take your money. I saw it last night on the other channel and I knew number three won." Jack replied, "Go ahead and take it. I saw that too, but I didn't think he could do it again."

When a preacher tells a story, even if it's a corny one like that, she takes a risk that the story will be more memorable than anything else she has to say. But on Palm Sunday, we're kind of like Jack from that story. We'd like for the story we hear today to end differently than we know it will.

As all stories do, the story of our Lord Jesus Christ during his time on earth has a beginning, a middle, and an end. In the past four months we've celebrated the beginning with the birth of the Christ child, heard bits and pieces of the middle, and today we're hearing the beginning of the end of the story, what William Barclay calls "The Beginning of the Last Act of the Drama" that is the life of Jesus.

As we think of Jesus riding into Jerusalem, let's remember he is not what his people were looking for when they imagined a Messiah. They wanted a mighty warrior, a political ruler with power and authority who would stand for them, defend and protect them. He's made it clear he doesn't fit *that* job description, just as he's made clear that in Jerusalem he'll be rejected, persecuted, and killed. But through the three years of his ministry he's received a lot of attention and people seek him, as we see from the reception he receives as he rides into a town overflowing with people gathered to observe the Passover. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!" the crowd cries. Barclay notes that "Hosanna" is "essentially a people's cry for deliverance and for help in the day of their trouble; an oppressed people's cry to their savior and their king."<sup>i</sup>

It's entirely possible, and even likely, that Jesus planned his entrance into Jerusalem. From other gospel accounts we know he was aware of what awaited him there. Scholars speculate he himself had previously arranged to borrow the donkey and colt he would ride that day. He knew he was not in good favor with the authorities—he knew they hated him and planned to get rid of him. He understood the risk of going, but he went anyway. And, according to those scholars, just as Jesus was riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey and her colt, Pontius Pilate was entering the city from the opposite side, riding a war horse, surrounded by soldiers, wearing the insignia of the Roman Empire. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan note in their book, *The Last Week*, that "Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus' procession embodied an alternative vision, the Kingdom of God." For us, as followers of Christ, "Holy Week and the journey of Lent are about an alternative procession and alternative journey... an anti-imperial and non-violent procession."<sup>ii</sup> Two very different men, enter Jerusalem in two very different ways with two very different motives. Surely that is not a coincidence.

Our Lord was a man of great courage, who faced his future without hesitation. That does not mean, of course, that he had no qualms, no uneasiness about what would happen to him over next few

days. The gospel accounts of our Lord's life and passion rarely inform us of his feelings, but the stories we've heard today about Jesus' cleansing of the temple and causing the fig tree to wither, placed as they are immediately following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, may give us a hint of his mood. And if we truly believe he was fully divine *and* fully human, we can reasonably think he felt at least some hesitation about what he faced, just as we do when we're facing something that makes us uncomfortable. But as Jay Seagrave reminded me yesterday, change and greatness both require risk and discomfort. We could find no better example of that than our Lord Jesus Christ.

At the end of our service today, we'll hear the Passion of Christ according to Matthew. We'll leave in silence with that awful story in our hearts and on our minds. But then what? What will we do with it once we leave here? Yesterday I saw a car with a plate on the front of it that asked a simple but profound question: If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? That's something to ponder as we journey with Christ in these last few days of Lent, in this week we call holy.

May we all, walking in the way of the cross, find it none other than the way of life and peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2*. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1975. P. 239.

<sup>ii</sup> Borg, Marcus, and Crossan, John Dominic. *The Last Week*. HarperOne, San Francisco, 2007.