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Palm Sunday

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Week after week, we experience the rhythm of the church year. Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost – it all has a kind of plodding rhythm to it. We are carried through the cycle of seasons. The parts make up a whole story of salvation history. Through them we feel the allure of God deeper into relationship; no matter what is going on in our year; these days anchor us. Indeed, the pilgrimage of the church year has been referred to by one liturgical scholar as a “journey into the heart of God.”¹

You could see Ordinary time (the time you see green in the church) as the season we glimpse the works of Christ, his message and ministry. We have special seasons like Epiphany and Advent that both hold their particular graces, both illumining the expansive scope of God’s presence and mission; but it’s Holy Week where the church believes it journeys into that mystical vision of the heart behind all things.

Each Holy Week we are presented a cast of characters – Peter, and Caiaphas, Judas, and Simon of Cyrene, and Mary his Mother – and we are invited to see ourselves in the characters. Though the story has been casted in history, liturgical drama asks our imaginations to re-inhabit the roles. Maybe this Holy Week you are Simon of Cyrene, helping someone else carry their cross; or maybe you are like Peter and you’ve heard the cries of suffering like the crowing rooster awakening you to a deeper faith and commitment to Christ, or maybe you are Mary Magdalene who gets up early to find the dawn burning with resurrection life.

Today, I want to reflect briefly on one other character in the story; one that doesn’t get too much press. He’s hardly mentioned and warrants no name. We heard about him in the procession of the palms as the service began. Other than Jesus, he is the most important character in the story.

In Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem- he did not walk into the city. He rode on the back of a donkey to fulfill the book of Zechariah, “Behold, your king is coming to you; he is righteous and has salvation, humble and mounted on a

donkey.” And the people called out “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest.” The drama is building, and for the most part the text for the story has been written.

Well, that is the context. But this donkey was just there minding his business and doing whatever it is that donkeys do all day. Two men came and laid their cloaks over him and led him away to throngs of people. He was set free for service. The Lord needed him. He offered the one gift he had to give and that made it holy. He simply carried Jesus where he needed to go.

I’m not trying to suggest that we should all be donkeys; actually, I think I am. You may think that you have no gifts to offer. *I am more a person of great doubt than great faith. I have terrible church attendance. I can’t sing like I used to. I am lonely. I’m the patron saint of the lost cause. What gifts do I have to offer?* One gift we all have is to bear Christ in the world. The first point is that we are set free to carry Christ with us wherever we go. Whatever we give, is made holy, when offered to God.

Secondly, it would be an error for the donkey to think that the accolades and waving of palm branches were for him. One of the great Christian writers of the last century G.K. Chesterton wrote a poem about the donkey (“that beast with ears like errant wings”) where the donkey breaks his silence: *Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb/I keep my secret still/Fools! For I also had my hour/One far fierce hour and sweet:/There was a shout about my ears/And Palms before my feet.* When we think it is all about us; all the accolades and the cheering, we grow afraid, we draw back. But the donkey knows it’s not about him; his job is just to point away from himself to God. Likewise, all that we have, and all that we are is meant to mirror God’s life back to God.

Finally, we should recognize that the donkey can’t see Jesus most of the time. The donkey could not always see Jesus but because he carried him- everyone else could see the Lord. We bear Christ for others to see and meet the

Lord- and come to recognize God ourselves through other people. Even though he could not always see Jesus- he was closer than anyone else - because he carried Christ with him along the way.

Wherever you are this morning – whether you are bored, or anxious, or lost in the transitions of this season, take a deep breath. God is with you. Even when you cannot see God, God is close. Imagine others seeing God in you.

Imagine God depending on you;
imagine God needing you.

The world won't glimpse the heart of God without your role. We should be humbled to be Christians – we bear neither our own fame nor our own defeats, but Christ, our humble Lord. We should be confident as well – is there anything more necessary, more essential to bring to the world than the humble love of Jesus?

And if this all feels too much, if today feels like one of those days that you'd rather God depend on someone else, then remember the last irony of this drama is his: we bear him, but he also bears us. Like the donkey that was loosened, he is loosened, untied from heaven, and he leads us through this Holy Week; he bears our stories, and our hurt, and our grief, and it is upon the back of his humble flesh that we are each borne into the heart of God.

¹ Phillip Pfatteicher's book of this title