

Pastor Joe Polzin
Matthew 21:1-11
“What Can A Donkey Teach Us?”
Year A – First Sunday in Advent
December 1, 2019

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Well, we see the changes everywhere now, don't we? Last week, we celebrated Thanksgiving, which as we know is then followed up by the time-honored tradition of Black Friday. And Black Friday is considered by many to be the official commencement of the holiday season. At least, from a secular, retail point of view. And of course, tomorrow is Cyber Monday, when another round of shopping commences.

I'm really not lamenting all this as a pastor. I actually find it kind of fascinating that, a world that can be so separated from the life of the Church, especially those who bristle at any kind of tradition or liturgy, are simply adopting a different kind of tradition and liturgy. It's all liturgy. The stores mark the changing of the seasons, just as we do today, except their focus is on sales, or shopping, or something else. The paraments of the town change, as well: lights going up in our neighborhoods, trees shining through living room windows, radio stations playing Christmas music, and one song says it best: "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas."

But we Christians also come to church, where today, the First Sunday in Advent, marks the beginning not only of a new season, but also of a new church year. Happy New Year, by the way. And here, too, we see the changes. The music is different, our wreath is up, the trees are up, the parament colors change from the green of the season after Pentecost to the blue of Advent. We can see and feel these things, outside the church as well as in, and they communicate to us exactly what is going on here.

Which is why it might seem so strange that right in the middle of all these warm fuzzies we're beginning to feel... is a Palm Sunday Reading. And in that reading is a donkey. Covered in cloaks, carrying a humble man, greeted with palms. It's a donkey, barging into our preparations for Christmas. Now, why this Gospel Reading at this time of year? It seems so out of place. A Palm Sunday before Christmas? A coronation before the King is even born? It's all so topsy-turvy, jarring in how out of place it seems.

But perhaps we need a bit of jarring these days. We have become so familiar, so comfortable with the Christmas story. All the way from the Old Testament promises to the New Testament events, we hear the story every year. We're all so familiar with the story of God's salvation that perhaps we can't even hear it in its full impact anymore. We lose sight of what it means and each detail that lends itself to what truly happened. Or we overemphasize certain details that, in the end, don't matter at all.

Let me give you an example. What's the most important, familiar animal in the Christmas story? One that's in just about every scene as you picture all the episodes in your mind? Yeah, you have the sheep, but there's always a bunch of them, and they don't really do anything. There's a more important animal.

How did Joseph get Mary, who was great with child, down from Galilee to Bethlehem? What is standing next to Joseph as he knocks on the door at the inn? What creature is always there in the stable with the other animals as they gaze at the newborn babe, with the artistic license of a slight smile on their faces? And when Herod finds out that he's been duped by the

Magi, how do Mary and Joseph make their flight to Egypt, with saddlebags laden with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh? It's a *donkey*. You can see it. It's always there. No celebration of Christmas, no nativity scene, no Sunday School pageant is complete without a donkey!

As we start to think about our readings today, then, there seems to be quite a connection! Jesus entering David's *town*, Bethlehem, on a donkey to *begin* his mission. And Jesus entering David's *city*, Jerusalem, on a donkey to *complete* his mission. Perfect! What great bookends, a donkey at either end of the mission of Jesus. There's some great material, my sermon is just going to write itself. Except, there's one problem. There's no donkey to be found in the actual Christmas story. No donkey in Matthew chapter 1 or 2, no donkey in Luke chapter 2. Not in English, not in Greek. No mention of a donkey. We've invented him to fit what we know *must* have happened in the Christmas story.

And what this shows is that some of the things that are so familiar to us, that seem so important, can be simply made up. And the donkey is only one example, just the "tip of the iceberg," as they say. For instance, we've been conditioned to always know what Joseph was thinking when he was told he would be the earthly father of the Son of God, even though the Bible never actually tells us that. And Luke was content to only mention briefly that Mary pondered all these things in her heart, but never spells out exactly how she felt. But modern authors nowadays seem to read her mind with clarity 2,000 years later.

Even the angels' announcement to the shepherds has been co-opted. Instead of, "Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" it's been modified so that the Christmas theme we end up hearing over and over is "Peace on Earth." Which then isn't a large step to get to "World Peace." In other words, Christmas can become a call to action for everyone to "just get along," even though Jesus himself admitted he has not come to bring peace, but a sword.

That's what a lot of people make Christmas out to be, even some people who are sitting in pews. That peace becomes something *other than* what God intends. Instead, peace becomes an imperative. A command. Make peace, that's what God wants you to do, don't you know? It's Christmas after all. "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me," as the song says. And soon enough, the Kingdom of God that Jesus brings is substituted with a kingdom that we have fashioned and put together by simply being *nice* to one another. Is that what we get from Jesus this Advent and Christmas season? A reminder to start over? A reminder to be *nice* to everybody?

You see, the danger that we face in our self-created celebrations of Christmas is not merely that we miss the "true meaning of Christmas" or something like that. Rather, the danger that we face is that we misunderstand the entire nature of the entire Kingdom of God. We change God's working in a specific way for a specific purpose, and try to shoehorn God to fit *our* goals and *our* agendas. To get God to work in a way that *we* would like to see things happen. The Kingdom of God soon becomes transformed into our own little personal vision of what we think the world and our lives should be. And when that happens, then Jesus' arrival is not for the sake of the world, but for the sake of me, as a means to my own personal end.

But, ironically enough, that's why we need to hear about a donkey today. Not a Christmas donkey, not a made up one. But a *real* donkey. A Palm Sunday one. Not with a humanistic smile on its face, but with a burden on its back. That's why we have our Gospel reading. Because our sentimentality and self-created kingdoms are stripped away to reveal specifically what God the Father has done in Jesus Christ. Jesus has come to die for sinners. He come to bring his kingdom to his people.

If we learn anything from Matthew's Gospel, if we learn anything from this donkey, this animal that was really there on that Sunday outside of Jerusalem, it's that the Kingdom of God happens according to a well-laid out, well-organized, well-coordinated plan. Nothing in God's Kingdom happens accidentally. And the donkey shows that! Jesus knows in advance that a particular man is going to have a particular donkey with a colt. And he knows what this man's response is going to be, but all the disciples need to say is, "The Lord needs them," and he would let them go at once.

As Matthew reminds us, this is a plan that was revealed hundreds of years before. That a king, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden, is coming to you, God told the Israelites (21:5). This was going to be the sign that the finality of the Kingdom of God was about to happen. Even most of the crowd, Matthew tells us, when they see Jesus on a donkey, caught on to the fact that something was happening on here. That the Son of David was finally coming to his throne. There is nothing left to chance. There is nothing left to the scheming of human rulers and authorities. God himself brings the Kingdom to his people.

And so, on a donkey, the Son of David enters David's city. The man, Jesus, enters to be acknowledged as King. To be raised up and recognized by all people as the Son of God. But not on a throne, rather, he will do so on a cross. He is Israel's King, as we heard last Sunday, on Christ the King Sunday. The final, ultimate King. The Kingdom is happening. God is reigning and ruling. And whether those crowds truly understood what Jesus was doing or not, their hymns of praise sung to a man who was humble and riding on a donkey remind us that the reign of God is not accomplished in glory and might. It is accomplished instead in sacrifice. In humility. In the Son of God pouring himself out and becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

At the start of this Advent season, today, God is bringing us to see an entirely different perspective. Not a perspective of our own creation, but one revealed to us by God himself. Because, honestly, we may very well often wonder at times if there is a plan. If there really is a Kingdom of God that has anything to do with this world or with our lives. We might lose hope as we look around, thinking this world is simply doomed to collapse in on itself, and fear that it's going to drag us down with it.

But when God caused a certain man to ride a certain donkey, in a certain place, and on a certain day, we are reminded that God's working in history is anything but random. We are not left to struggle for ourselves, required to create a "peace on earth" when all the odds seem stacked against us. Rather, we see we are brought into the reign and rule of God, the Kingdom that he himself brings. And he has a definite goal for us. The goal that Jesus Christ was sent to fulfill on our behalf. That Jesus brings peace among those with whom God is pleased. And he is pleased with you. Because of Jesus.

So, do you know what we do? We sing with those crowds along the road their song: "Holy, holy, holy Lord God of pow'r and might: Heaven and earth are full of Your glory. Hosanna. Hosanna. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest." Does that sound familiar?

That's the *Sanctus*, what we sing right before our King comes *to us*, humble, and found in the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper. And he has already come to us another way, humble, in words read from a book, and spoken from a pulpit. And it's in all those moments when our King continually comes to us, that we become connected quite personally and truly to his Kingdom. Our faith does not get caught up with all the temporary and self-created kingdoms of this world, but rather belongs to a King who rose to life after dying on a cross, so that he might make his death and resurrection our death and resurrection.

A donkey at Christmas? It's nice, and you'll probably find one in my nativity scene at my house. But, in the end, it's not important or even true. But, a King on a donkey, going to a cross, bringing us his Kingdom, just the way God had planned it? That's exactly what we need this Advent and Christmas season. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**

(Adapted from Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Kloha, Concordia Seminary chapel, St. Louis, Dec. 4, 2001.)