

“The Lord Needs It”
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Year C
Palm Sunday (2019)
Luke 19:28-40

A few years ago I was invited to speak to a group of young clergy on the subject of “Keeping your ministry fresh and creative.” This is how I started: I said, “I’ve been an ordained minister for 20 years, which means that when Easter Sunday comes around this year, I will step up to the pulpit, look out over the congregation, and wonder: How will I make fresh for them this year the story that begins every year with the same words, “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb” (John 20:1). While experience is an asset in almost every area of ministry, the experience of trying to preach an original sermon on Easter Sunday can be daunting.” Most of those young ministers I was talking to were nodding their heads. They thought they had said everything that could be said about resurrection the year before, squeezed that idea like a sponge until there wasn’t a single drop left. The thought of trying to get a fresh, creative sermon out of it was daunting indeed.

But then there’s this Sunday, Palm Sunday, which comes around every year, too. And while the story of Jesus’ entry into the city of Jerusalem is a beautiful and powerful story, it’s no Resurrection, is it? So, how do you make Palm Sunday fresh every year? How do you take this ancient story and squeeze something new out of it? Well, here’s what I do. Sometimes on this Sunday I preach on the passion of Jesus instead of the palms. It is one of the options. In fact, it has become one of the preferred options on this Palm/Passion Sunday, as we have begun to call it. Not everybody will make it to the Good Friday service this week and it would be wrong to go from the celebration of Palm

Sunday straight to the celebration of Easter Sunday. There can be no resurrection without death. One year I asked one of my church members to offer a ten-minute meditation on the Palms and then I followed with a ten-minute meditation on the Passion. That was a good year; she was amazing. But most of the time I simply take the assigned text and go through it with a fine-toothed comb, hoping that some word or phrase will show itself to me in a way it never has before. This year the phrase I combed out was this one about the donkey. “Tell them the Lord needs it,” Jesus said, and I assumed he was talking about himself.

I did a quick search through the Gospels to see if there are other places where Jesus mentions his needs. There is that moment in John 4 where Jesus asks the Samaritan woman to give him a drink of water (which he never gets), and that other moment in John 19 when he says, “I thirst,” (in order to fulfill the Scripture). But on the whole Jesus does not appear to be a needy person. I am reminded of that sermon Paul preached to the Athenians on Mars Hill in which he said, “The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything” (Acts 17:24-25). The Son of God, in the same way, wasn’t often served by human hands and didn’t seem to need much of anything. So, the fact that he would say he needed something is, in itself, remarkable but the fact that what he needs, when he finally gets around to mentioning it, is a *donkey*, is more remarkable still. “If anyone ask you why you are untying it tell them the Lord needs it,” Jesus says. The Lord needs a donkey. And, sure enough, someone does ask those two disciples why they are untying the donkey. “The Lord needs it,” they answer, and that’s the end of that.

But *why*? Why did the *Lord* need a *donkey*? It would be a little more obvious if we were reading this story from the Gospel of Matthew rather than the Gospel of Luke. In chapter 21 Matthew says that Jesus sent his disciples to fetch a donkey in order to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt the foal of a donkey.” It’s a quote from Zechariah 9:9, and according to W.G. Kummel this is a verse that was “in the early days applied by the rabbis to the Messiah.” It is possible then that the religious leaders of that time were telling the people that one of these days the Messiah himself would come riding into the city of Jerusalem, ‘humble and mounted on a donkey.’ It is also possible that, as Kummel suggests, Jesus was, “by a conscious act,” associating himself with this prediction so that people would think of him as the Messiah. It’s possible, but it doesn’t seem likely, does it? All through the Gospel Jesus has been shushing anyone who calls him the “Son of God” or the “King of Israel.” Doesn’t it seem a little odd that now, suddenly, he would parade into the city practically wearing a sash with the word *Messiah* on it?

It does seem a little odd. In fact, it seems a little odd to me that he would tell his disciples to say, if anyone asks why they are untying the donkey, that “the Lord” needs it. I did another quick search last week and discovered that of the 79 times the word Lord is mentioned in the Gospel of Luke Jesus never uses it to refer to himself. Luke refers to him as “the Lord,” Jesus’ disciples refer to him as “the Lord,” other characters in the story refer to him as “the Lord,” but when Jesus himself uses the word he uses it to refer to God. Is it possible then that when he says about this donkey, “the Lord needs it,” he

isn't talking about himself at all, but about God the father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth? And if so, then why would God need a donkey?

Just suppose that old W.G. Kummel was right when he said that the rabbis of that day were quoting Zechariah 9:9 and telling the people that someday their king would come to them, "humble and riding on a donkey." And just suppose that it wasn't Jesus but God who wanted everyone to know that this boy of his was a king. Suppose he was the one who had whispered into Jesus' ear during the night, giving him instructions about how to make his entry. Jesus may have preferred to slip into the city unnoticed, but those of you who make it to the Good Friday service this week will be reminded that it wouldn't be the last time he did something simply because his father wanted him to. "Not my will but thine be done," he said, and I'm guessing he had said it more than a few times before. So, what if this parade into the city was not even Jesus' idea but only one more act of obedience in the service of his Father? It would change things, wouldn't it? When he said, "The Lord needs it," he would mean, really, "God needs me to do this thing. God needs me to show myself as his Messiah."

If that's true it would mean that God wanted to give the people of Jerusalem a chance to receive the gift he had given. "Look," he said, pointing, "Here is the one I have chosen to rescue you, to deliver you, to save you from your sins. What do you think about that?" And maybe what God needed, really, was the acknowledgment of the people. Maybe what he wanted was for someone in that crowd to say thank you. And that's just what begins to happen. As Jesus got on the donkey and started riding people began to throw their cloaks down on the road in front of him, doing the best they could in their poor way to roll out the red carpet as he rode into the city. And as he approached

the path that led down from the Mount of Olives the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” Whether or not it did anything for Jesus I think it did something for God, don’t you? To hear those people rejoicing over his son as they were? And maybe that’s why, when the Pharisees tell Jesus to shut those people up Jesus says, “I tell you, if these were silent the stones would shout out,” because that seems to be the way my Father wants it today. He wants these people to praise his Son. The one who could raise up from these stones children to Abraham has raised up from these children shouts of praise. So don’t get in the way. Let it be.

The Lord needed a donkey to do this, to unleash the praise of those people, who were able to see that at long last their king was coming to them. But maybe what the Lord really needed was to hear the people acknowledge the gift he was giving. When Jesus was born there wasn’t much response from the people. That baby was slipped into the world so quietly nobody knew he had come. It was the angels, on that night, who sang, “Glory to God in the highest.” But on this Palm Sunday the people finally saw Jesus for the gift he was, and it was their shouts that filled the air with praise, them who said, in voices like angels, “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.” And in the highest heaven I believe God was at peace, because he finally got what he needed—a loud, happy, heartfelt “thank you” for the gift of his only son.

But that’s not all. I think his only son got what he needed that day. I think the praise of those people was music to Jesus’ ears. After all he had done for them, and before all he was going to do, it must have been a bittersweet gift to hear them

acknowledge it. There's no way to know, of course, but I wouldn't be surprised if those shouts and songs of praise were what sustained him in the days to come, that even while some were shouting "Crucify him, crucify him!" he could close his eyes and hear the crowds crying out, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in highest heaven." So, maybe Jesus needed it, too—the acknowledgment of the people, their grateful, joyful response for all those deeds of power he had done among them, and all that he was about to do.

But that's not all. Again, there's no way to prove it, but I believe those people needed it, too. I believe they needed a chance to let loose with long, loud happy shouts of praise. I believe we have this in us, somewhere. Someone has said that what separates us from the animals is our capacity for worship. A few years ago I preached a Palm Sunday sermon called, "Teaching Stones to Shout," and at the end of it I asked the congregation to whisper "Hosanna!" and then say it a little louder, and then a little louder, and then a little louder still until—even in that holy place—we were shouting the word. One of our members told me later that she hadn't felt that good in a long time. There was something in her—some love for God—that needed to find its way out. So, on a day like this one we pull out the organ stops, we pick up our palm branches, and we parade down the aisle singing "All Glory, Laud, and Honor" at the top of our lungs like fools because the Lord needs it, and because Jesus needs it, and because—believe it or not—we need it. We need to praise God, and God needs our praise, and Jesus is on this Palm Sunday and every day the reason for our rejoicing.

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