

Sermon Title: Donkey and Colt  
Text: Zechariah 9:9-10; Matthew 21:1-11  
By: Rev. Terry Carty  
Date: 4-17-11  
Place: Kingston Springs UMC  
Season: Palm Sunday

Main Point: As followers of Christ, our basic hopes today are the same as those who waved palm branches: for peace, hope for the common good, for an alternative to the brokenness of the world. (Inspired by a lectionary commentary by Carl Gregg)

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Can you imagine the scene, Jesus coming riding on top of those two little donkeys – the mama one and the baby one? How did he ride two donkeys at the same time? Did he straddle both at the same time like some circus act? What is up with this story?

This story in Matthew is considered one of the contradictions in the Bible. Skeptics point to it and to make their point that scripture is inconsistent and, thus, not accurate. Others say that Matthew, unlike Mark and Luke who report the same story, was trying to be correct according to the Hebrew prophesies in Zechariah and he got it wrong, thinking that parallel descriptions of the same animal were references to two different beasts.

I think that we miss the point when we try to find our proof in historic fact of scripture. Much of the beauty and truth of literature has been lost on our current insistence on factual accounts. I believe that Matthew brings us a deeper truth here.

One current historical Jesus scholar argues that Matthew did not make a mistake at all. In keeping with the symbolism in Zechariah, Matthew worked hard to make the point that Jesus did not come riding triumphantly into Jerusalem like a military leader on a chariot and war horse wielding a bow and other weapons. Undoubtedly the Roman Governor Pilate would have ridden grandly into Jerusalem through the main gate that way this week to insure control of all the Jewish pilgrims in town for Passover.

Instead, Matthew has Jesus entering by one of the lesser gates riding not on a stallion or a mare, or a mule or a male donkey. He rides the most unmilitary mount imaginable: a female nursing donkey with her little colt trotting along beside her. Jesus comes nonviolently to bring peace in a way that remembers the language of the prophet.

Now imagine how ridiculous this really looked: Jesus riding this little donkey, his legs dangling with his feet almost touching the ground. If he stood up the little donkey could probably walk out from under him. And the little colt hovering close to the mother donkey intimidated by the crowd. This is so ridiculous that it is making a political statement about the inability of Rome, with all its military pomp, to bring peace to this region of the empire. This Jewish crowd is proclaiming this man on a nursing donkey mare their savior!

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We, in today's America, should appreciate this form of political satire more than most. We often find our way through the rhetoric, half truths, and outright misrepresentations of our battling political leaders by satire and lampooning comedians. Saturday Night Live has

enjoyed another new life by exposing the comedy of our politics and politicians since the George H. W. Bush administration. It reached a peak in the last presidential campaign.

This past October two of the foremost political satirists, Jon Stewart and Robert Colbert, attracted almost a quarter of a million people to the Capitol Mall in DC for the Rally for Sanity. And it was appropriately insane with participants carrying signs with all sorts of tongue-in-cheek slogans that lampooned the petty power struggles that characterize so much of what happens in Washington.

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We have grown to appreciate laughing at or even being enraged by political satire. We should appreciate the situation where Jesus is riding into Jerusalem through the back gate on this little donkey and being hailed “Hosanna Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!”

I think that the basic hopes of the people who flocked to the Rally for Sanity are the same as the hopes of the people who shouted “Hosanna” – ‘Save us’ – to Jesus. We still hope for peace, hope for the common good, hope for an alternative to the brokenness of our world.

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In many ways the lampooning and satire are the easier part. The next day Jesus continued the direction he began with his unusual entry to the Holy City by going into the Temple and overturning the tables to interrupt business as usual. He moved from satire to making broad and increasingly public demonstrations that expressed his passion for justice – and his anger at injustice that patterned after the Hebrew prophets before him. There is quite a contrast between the status quo of Herod’s kingship and Jesus’ kingdom of God. This contrast was so striking that it led to the death of Jesus that week.

Prophetic Christianity is risky – it does not always lead to a martyr’s death – but it leads to a living hope. When we follow Jesus’ way, we risk being ridiculed for not looking cool on our little donkey. When we follow Jesus’ way we risk becoming marginalized because our emphasis on our broken world requires change.

We have seen imitators of Christ in our own lifetimes, Nelson Mandela is an imitator of Christ, not because he suffered 27 years in prison, but because he held out for peace and justice, and led South Africa to resurrection. Mother Theresa of Calcutta was an imitator of Christ, not because she lived in the world’s worst conditions helping the poorest of the poor, but because she witnessed to their plight with courage and selflessness. Erin Brockovich is an imitator of Christ, not because she risked her life, but because he held out for justice against a company that profited by destroying the lives of neighboring residents. The student is an imitator of Christ when she stands up for her friends against the “Mean Girls” at school. In each case it is the courage to pursue justice in the face of evil that is redemptive.

As we prepare to enter Holy Week, may Matthew’s story of Palm Sunday continue to haunt us and to challenge us. Today, how may God be calling you – or us – to follow Jesus’ way for such a time as this?