

Sermon: Riding a Donkey Luke 19:28-40 Palm Sunday, April 10 2022
Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON Rev. Steve Clifton

In the old west, when a young horse was full of vigour and resisted all attempts to be tamed, it was sometimes paired with a donkey. The horse would be tied to the donkey by rope. The horse would buck and kick and run wild, dragging the donkey behind it. The yoked creatures would disappear over the horizon, the horse leading, the donkey in tow behind it, trying desperately to keep up with its stronger, faster companion. But in time the pair would return, the horse exhausted from its efforts, the donkey, now in charge, now in the lead, bringing the horse home again.

In their book entitled The Last Week- Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write of two processions entering Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30, one procession lead by a horse and the other by a donkey. One procession was an imperial march, the other a peasant parade.

From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down from the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. He rode through the Golden Gate by the Temple Mount. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers were common people.

On the opposite side of the city, just 100s of meters away to the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem's Ganneth Gate by the Imperial fortress, riding on horseback at the head of a column of soldiers.

Pilate's procession proclaimed the power of empire. Imagine the imperial procession's arrival in the city, a visual display of conquering might meant to inspire fear and awe: horses, soldiers, armor, helmets, weapons, banners, imperial eagles, the rhythm of marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. ...The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some resentful, some fearful ...

Just a short distance away on the other side of town Jesus procession proclaimed a very different kingdom from the Empire of Rome. Common people walked, one rode a lowly donkey. The onlookers weren't silent, they sang words of hope.

Through one of Jerusalem's gates rode a military governor on horseback accompanied by stern and stoic soldiers. Through the other gate rode a humble peasant on the back of a donkey, accompanied by joyful, singing crowds.

Into Jerusalem Jesus rode on the back of a donkey.

Did you know that there are 40 million donkeys alive in the world today? Ninety-six percent of them live in underdeveloped countries. They are owned and used by the poor of the world. They serve as pack animals. Their energy is harnessed for pumping water for the thirsty

and milling grain for the hungry. Jesus, who so identified with the poorest of the poor that he said, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink" rode into town on the service animal of the poor.

I knew a farmer, just south of our city who kept a donkey in his fields with his sheep. Once a donkey has bonded with a flock, it will protect them against predators in the same way it would protect one if its own. If the herd is threatened the donkey will bray a warning to the herd and then will chase, or trample, the predator. Donkeys make good shepherds.

Jesus rides a donkey through the Jerusalem's golden gate

The prophet Zechariah, some 500 years before Jesus, wrote of a donkey that would enter Jerusalem carrying a king. Jesus no doubt knew these words:

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; ...he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea... (Zechariah 9:9-10, NRSV)

The one riding a donkey comes to offer the world another way, another path, a different kind of kingdom. There is way of the world, the way of Pilate and Empire, of conquering might and worldly power. And in Jesus who rides on a simple donkey we see Gods invitation to embrace another way...

In southern France during the Nazi occupation, the people of a small village called Le Chambon defied their occupiers and formed an underground network for saving refugees, many of them Jewish children. The rescuers of Le Chambon knew that they might face concentration camps or worse if found out.

Their Pastor, Andre Trocme encouraged his defiant village with stories of donkeys ...the donkeys of the New testament... like the one we imagine carried Mary into Bethlehem; like the same one which may have aided Jesus family's escape to Egypt; like the one the Samaritan might have used to help rescue a wounded man as he moved him to a place of safety And then there is the one in the gospel today carrying Jesus in to Jerusalem...

This pastor created scenario after scenario where the owner of the donkey hesitated to allow his animal to be used by people for their various journeys, and where again and again the donkey in it strength and stubbornness refused to bow to her master's fear.

His listeners were living in a time and place in history where fear dominated and where their faith called them to find courage --- perhaps even stubbornly so. On the back of a donkey Jesus rode into Jerusalem. Amen