

The King's Donkey

John 12:12-19 ~ April 9, 2017 (Palm Sunday) ~ Heritage Lutheran Church

The first car I owned was a purple 1967 Mustang. You know, I wish I still had that car, but it left the family over 35 years ago. I remember clearly the day I bought it and brought it home. It was a glorious feeling to be seen driving that wonderful vehicle and to see it parked in our driveway. It was my ride. It said something about me. It made me into someone. Well that was the sentiment of a 19-year old American male in 1973.

Now for our purposes today I want to note for you that my 1967 Mustang was named after the wild horses that populated the western United States. They were a symbol of power and freedom. Cowboys loved Mustangs because they were fast and tenacious. They were extraordinarily good at the business of herding cattle which was vital to western economy. They served Native Americans as war ponies and as symbols of the wild freedom which was their way of life. All of this symbolism found its way into my thinking about my first car, my first ride as a young man. What could be better than a purple Mustang!

Well, the truth was that symbolism was about as far as it went. In reality my little Mustang was more donkey than horse. It had a three speed transmission with an in-line 6 cylinder engine. Google tells me that it was called the Thriftpower I6 and well tuned it could generate approximately 120 horse power from its 200 cubic inches fitted with a single barrel carburetor. For those to whom these statistics are meaningless, my Mustang's power was on the down-side of pathetic. "Burning rubber," the pastime of my peers with muscle cars, was not in the cards for me. At the time, I was sensible enough know that my car's economical performance was in my best interest. However, there were moments when I craved the rumble of a truly powerful ride to elevate my status on Main Street.

The point of this reverie about a purple Mustang is to connect us with an ageless reality. Throughout time, what a person uses for transportation not only gets them from one place to another, but it also helps to create the impression they make on the world. From an Egyptian war chariot to a covered wagon, from an ox cart to a main battle tank, from a knight's charger to a circus pony; what a person rides shapes our opinion of them. It informs the level of threat they impose. It informs our understanding of their benefit to us. It tells us about their purpose and their potential.

This is why it is so important that we pay attention to what Jesus was riding on that Palm Sunday morning so long ago. It has ramifications that extend down through time to this very day. John's rendition of this story clearly state's:

And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it...

The King's donkey is so integral that we simply expect it to be part of the story. But it is not. It would be like watching a ceremonial parade on television where the President of the United States rode on a mini bike rather than in a limousine. The leader of the free world squatting on a tiny motorcycle would reduce his image to that of a circus clown, not to mention driving the entire secret service crazy. We get what is wrong with that scenario. But we don't seem to pick up the same irrational picture when we read about Jesus' donkey ride in the Palm Sunday parade. But we need to. We need to connect the dots when Jesus as the very Word of God precisely fulfills the prophecy of Scripture with his conscious choice.

And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

Zechariah, a prophet and a priest, in Jerusalem writes from the 6th century BC. John quotes his prophecy about Jesus and the royal donkey to foretell the nature of Christ's coming to Jerusalem on that Day of Palms. Zechariah himself had been witness to the powerful military processions of the mighty Persian Army. At that time in history, the coming of the Persian army meant war and destruction. It was a thing of magnificent war horses and elaborate armored chariots. But Zachariah foretold a day when a new King would come; the true king in Israel. Zachariah made it clear that the Messianic King would come in peace. He would come to bind up wounds, put aside fear, and bring the new day of peace with God. This was the message that was conveyed on Palm Sunday by the king's donkey. Jesus was and, indeed, is King. But as King he came in peace. He came to bring healing and new life to the world, not war and destruction. Riding the king's donkey said it all. As Scripture describes this:

His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him.

Now it is an open question how many people truly understood the meaning of the message when Jesus chose to ride the king's donkey. Clearly, even his disciples did not

completely get it. But later after the resurrection, they searched the Scriptures to make sense of their new reality and they discovered Zechariah's prophecy. Jesus' ride on his royal donkey was more than a symbol, it was a powerful prophetic message: "The Kingdom of God is about peace." It is about the end to conflict and a new world order of neighbors serving neighbors. That is what the donkey means.

The peaceful nature of the Kingdom of God shaped the very nature of the early church in Jerusalem. That church formed around the business of taking care of those in need. It was about teaching the nature of love and how best to serve our neighbors. As the Christian Church spread out into the world the humble serving symbol of the king's donkey went with them. Christianity easily translated itself from culture to culture as it focused on the love of Christ, not on self pride or social status. Works of love became the mark of the Christian Church, not acts of war. The Christian Church was not designed to conquer. It was made to serve.

Now naturally, much of Christian history is filled with conflict, not peace. Many Christians have gone to war on the basis of religious rationalizations. Christians have persecuted and harassed their neighbors instead of serving them. Church history is filled with war, prejudice, and corruption of all kinds. And over all of this sin stands the cross of Jesus. Christ died because of our horrific sin. But he also chose to ride the king's donkey. That choice is timeless in its significance. We are never fully a part of the Kingdom of God until we clearly see Jesus on his donkey. His Kingdom is a place of peace. It seeks peace in the world in a way that is lasting. His Kingdom seeks peace in each Christian life. His Kingdom seeks peace in a way that puts it as the prize for this day and for everyday.

As you see Jesus riding on that king's donkey I challenge you to see two things. First, I challenge you to see your King. I mean your true King; the rightful ruler of your life. Yes you will likely vote for another president, or senator, or governor. But in truth that vote will mean less and less as you see Jesus riding a donkey. Because that ride on Palm Sunday so long ago means that you have a king. You are in the Kingdom. Your life is ruled through eternal monarchy. No other social order or system of government really means anything in the long run except the Kingdom of God.

Second, as you see your Lord and King on a donkey, please realize what that means for you. Not only are you loved by God; not only are you completely saved by grace; but you are a member of the Kingdom of Peace. Service to our neighbor which brings peace

is the very center of who we are in the Kingdom of God. This is not meant to just be theoretical. It is meant to dominate our lives and shape our actions. As members of Christ's Kingdom we are here to do his will, not our own. His will is that we work for peace in every aspect of our lives. You have that opportunity today. You are his by grace. You see him on the king's donkey and you know what that means. How will Christ's humility live in us and bring peace into our lives and the lives around us? The joy of responding to that challenge is truly the reason we wave palms and shout hosanna. Let us rise up and follow our king, riding on his royal donkey, into a future of peace. It is a peace that passes all understanding. It is a peace that lasts forever.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.