

Palm Sunday

April 10, 2022

From power over to power with

Of war horses and donkeys

Luke 19: 29-40

Psalm 31: 9-16

Philippians 2: 3-11

On this Palm Sunday our world still hears the thunder of war horses – make that artillery shells and bombs, more than it does the gentle clip clop of a donkey. We will get to the story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, but we do need to go to Psalm 31 first. Hear the pain of the people of the Ukraine - and of the world “Be gracious to our world O Lord, for we are in distress, our eyes waste away in grief, soul and body also. Our life is spent in sorrow, and our years with sighing; our strength fails because of our misery, and our bones waste away...there is terror all around.”

And in the middle of all that violence and suffering and despair we read a story of a donkey. An ass, of all things. Jesus, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, not on a war horse. Ah, the absurdity of how God works in our world.

Permit just a touch of humour on this bleak world-scape. I suppose if Michele, could, a few weeks ago, focus a whole sermon around an angry, clucking mother hen, I can risk crafting a sermon around a donkey – an ass, as it were. I probably should have consulted with Lori and Dora who know donkeys far better than I do. Is a donkey always a symbol of peace? I kind of doubt that.

What did jump immediately to my mind was that other donkey story told in the book of Numbers in the Old Testament - the story of the speaking donkey. We think of braying donkeys, but this one speaks. It’s a great, humour filled story told in a grim time.

I’m sure Jesus would have known that story - and would have laughed out loud over the delightful absurdity of it. My hunch is that the Palm Sunday crowd

accompanying Jesus on that ride into Jerusalem would also have been reminded of that story, and would have smiled, and cheered, in delight.

The story? A wonderful tale of God using a donkey to foil the evil scheming of a terrified king. Moabite King Balak was facing a flood of Israelite refugees and feared that they would one day be powerful enemies – they were, after all, a rather prolific people. Moaned the king, “A people have come out of Egypt; they have spread over the face of the earth and have settled next to me” (Numbers 22:5).

In his terror, Balak tried to hire the prophet Balaam to cast a curse on the Israelites – and sent bags of gold to entice Balaam to go to Moab to cast his curses.

Balaam, being a praying prophet, prayed about this and God said, “don’t do it”. He says no to Balak, who promises Balaam yet more gold and more honors if only he will curse the Israelites.

Finally, Balaam, overwhelmed by the glitter of so much gold, agrees to do the cursing.

But an angry and very ticked off God sent an angel with a sword to block the road. Balaam, the prophet, could not see the angel and the sword – the immense danger he was in – but his donkey could. The prophet – the “seer” – couldn’t see the angel, but his donkey could.

Ah, the humour of God. The donkey veered off the field. An angry Balaam beats it. Next, the angel stood at a narrow point between two vineyards. To avoid decapitation the donkey scraped against a wall, hurting Balaam’s feet. Now Balaam is getting very ticked off. Another whack. A third time the angel stood, with sword in hand, at the narrowest place on the road, leaving no escape route. So, the donkey just lays down.

Furious, Balaam beats the donkey mercilessly, and suddenly the donkey gains the power of speech. “Let me tell you who the real jackass is. I am only trying to protect you from decapitation”.

At that Balaam’s eyes are finally opened and he too saw the angel and the sword. Finally, his eyes are opened, and he says, “How can I curse who God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the Lord has not denounced”

(23:8)? When will the world's eyes, our own eyes, be opened to God's kind of power?

Jesus rides a donkey into Jerusalem. And the crowd – those who caught the symbolism – cheered and cheered. The Romans would have ridiculed the symbolism. Power is displayed on a war horse. Donkeys are the symbol of weakness. Come Friday and the world will know who has the real power.

“From power over to power with” is the theme given for today.