

“The best things are borrowed”

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Virtual Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020

Mark 11: 1 - 11

Jesus, you rode into Jerusalem to shouts of “Hosanna. Save us.”

Today stands in sharp contrast to that first Palm Sunday. Our streets are not crowded. As we practise social and physical isolation, our city squares remain starkly quiet. As we enter lockdown, our public spaces sit unnaturally still.

Hosanna. Save us. In this trying time, grant us your peace and strength. Jesus, you experienced a parade of palms and shouts of joy. Today, our cries are not jubilant celebration. Many of us are in shock at the current state of the world. Many cry tears of grief and loss. Many live with fear and anxiety. Many of us worry about the unknown future. Hosanna. Save us.

In this trying time, grant us your peace and strength. You, Holy Other, do not arrive in Jerusalem on a charging steed. You enter riding on a donkey. You, Holy Other, confound our love of celebrity with your humility. You, Holy Other, confuse our lust for winning with your vulnerability.

I think of my wedding day, and weddings on TV, and I think of the common phrase: "something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue"? This tradition comes from an Old English rhyme (adding "A Sixpence in your Shoe"), and the four objects that the bride adds to her wedding outfit or carries with her on the big day are just good luck charms. Something old represents continuity; something new offers optimism for the future; something borrowed symbolizes borrowed happiness; something blue stands for purity, love, and fidelity; and a sixpence in your shoe is a wish for good fortune and prosperity, although this remains largely a British custom.

What to borrow... that can sometimes be the hardest decision, yet also the most meaningful and heartfelt action of the day. How often do we put great thought into the things we borrow? A student casually asks a classmate if they can borrow a pencil sharpener. A woman asks a neighbour if she can borrow the hedge trimmers. A contestant on The Amazing Race asks if they can borrow someone's cell phone to look up directions. We borrow. Yet today, we are restricted in the ability to connect with others, to borrow, to share, to reach out and nurture those physical relationships. But today, borrowing is different.

In our reading today, it insists that the donkey was borrowed. Jesus sent two disciples ahead of him on his way to Jerusalem. When they got to the small village of Bethphage, he said, "Go to the village up there, and you will find the colt of a donkey. Untie it and bring it to me. And if anybody asks, 'Where are you going with my animal,' simply say the Lord needs it, and we will bring it right back."

This time through the familiar story, it's the act of borrowing that catches my attention. Anybody who has heard the story knows how exciting it is. Hundreds of people lined the road of the city. The Passover holiday was near and excitement ignited the air. Jesus intentionally chooses to join the festival parade in this way. He is the One that everybody awaits. He is the rightful ruler of God's people, not Caesar. He comes to redeem the people from the oppression of the empire. And they sing, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

That Palm Parade with a big crowd is a stark difference to what we are experiencing on a global level this year. Palm Sunday 2020 will be one for the history books, and a very different kind to preach on, let me tell you. Some of you might remember where you were during the first landing on the moon, or when JFK was assassinated, or in my lifetime, 9/11 or the Ice Storm in the East of 1998. Now in our time, and in the lives of our children

and grandchildren, they will remember Covid-19, 2020. No parades, no gatherings, no palms up and down the aisles of sanctuaries – we stand 6 feet apart and practice social distancing – a stark difference from what Jesus practiced and preached.

But today we remember that Jesus comes on a borrowed donkey. Now what kind of king is this?

All of us know the story. As somebody notes, Jesus was born in a borrowed place and laid in a borrowed manger. As he traveled, he had no place of his own to spend the night. He rode into the city on a borrowed donkey. He ate his final meal in a borrowed room. He was crucified on a borrowed cross, wearing a borrowed crown that jokers stuck upon his head. And when he died, somebody placed his body in a borrowed tomb.

Jesus was a borrower. He did not grasp or grab what did not belong to him, but shared what was given to him freely. As the early church pondered the identity and character of Jesus, it declared, "Jesus did not count equality with God as something to be clutched." Our Lord did not hold onto heavenly glory and throw his weight around. He never forced himself upon anybody. So Jesus emptied himself. He gave himself completely away for the benefit of others.

Have you ever considered how remarkable this is? Jesus didn't own very much – just the tunic on his body and the sandals on his feet. After he was arrested and condemned, the soldiers tossed dice to see who would take his clothing.

He commanded the same of those who followed him. As he instructed them, "When you go out to proclaim the good news, take no money, no knapsack, no extra tunic, no extra shoes, not even a walking stick. Take only a word of peace, borrow the bed given to you, and proclaim that God's kingdom has come very close." At its core, the Good News of God does not need a lot of props. What it needs is the kind of people who believe it simply as they can.

That is remarkable, especially in our world today as so many healthcare workers, emergency responders, engineers, caretakers, grocery store workers, long haul truckers, and so many other critical workers find places to lay their weary heads in hotels that are borrowed and offered up for shelter. The health care workers are people who are risking their very lives to altruistically give of themselves to save lives and in sadder situations, choose which ones are left to perish. It's hard to imagine parades of Palms this year. But today we remember how the Saviour of the world is the One who borrows a donkey to ride downhill to his cross.

Who are the real blessed ones? Jesus says they are the people who don't have very much: the poor in spirit, those who mourn the loss of a loved one, those who are meek, those who are hungry for food and thirsty for righteousness. These are the blessed ones, says Jesus. Who are the blessed ones? Blessed are those who keep a light grip on all that they have, for they know that everything in life depends on the generosity of God. They are the people who have everything.

Once the guestmaster at a Benedictine monastery described why he kept no possessions other than the clothes on his back. He explained, "If your closet is empty, there is more room for God." Contrast that to the child who steps over piles of dirty laundry on the floor and says, "Mom, I have nothing to wear." Or the young adult with a library of video games saying "there's nothing to play". Or an adult, surrounded by shelves of books and movies who declares, "I'm bored and I have nothing to do."

There is a beauty to simplicity, to not owning much and needing very little. Those with this freedom will pay attention to the people around them. Little distracts them from the deep needs of the world. Nothing competes with their imagination or faithfulness. Today, the simplicity I long for is that we flatten the curve and that requires the simple act of social distancing. This is not a sprint, it is a marathon. We need to pace ourselves and be in it

for the long haul. This coming week we have Good Friday, then Easter Sunday. But in my mind, in the spirit of my soul, my stone will not roll away and my resurrection will not happen until Covid-19 no longer threatens our humanity and we all feel safe and secure once more, when we aren't feeling like we are living with borrowed time.

Jesus possessed a deep sensitivity to the world's deepest needs. He paid attention to the hurts of poor and rich alike, comprehending the forces that twist a good person out of shape, seeing how forgiveness can cancel every ongoing hurt and always healing the minds, bodies, and spirits of the people in his path. Let us, as we enter Holy Week, remember to practice a ministry of humility, compassion, and connection.

Most of all, Jesus' greatest possession was a love for every single person. His love was never a hovering, needy love, but rather a willingness to give what he could for the well-being to those around him. In the words of the early church, Jesus emptied himself. He humbled himself. And this is the kind of God that we glimpse in the man who borrows a donkey.

Today we remember how Jesus gives himself to the world. On this festive day, he rides a borrowed donkey into the center of the city that will reject him. A person with few possessions, he empties himself of all that he

has. It's all for us, in the name of Jesus, who owned very little, but who ultimately wishes to possess our hearts.

When we think in these ways, have we misinterpreted the message of Palm Sunday? Could it be that Palm Sunday can't be understood without reference to Good Friday? Jesus knew what he was doing. The followers thought, however, that they were welcoming their next leader, that their world was about to radically change with the leadership of a new prophet. They had no idea what lay ahead, about Jesus' demise. Every parade has a great leader, and you can tell in the parade who the powerful are, however Jesus, the man of power, came in humbly, on a borrowed donkey

So, on this Palm Sunday what will we hear? What voices will ring out? Where will our hearts be found? What will you borrow and how will you understand the impact of what you borrow and then, how you return it?

You, Holy Other, die on a cross. You, Holy Other, are executed. You are not the way of imperial power and principalities. You are the way of righteousness and radical compassion. In your passion, shake us, confront us, and teach us your ways. And grant us your conviction, your strength and your peace. Amen.