

Again & Again, We Draw on Courage | A Sermon for Palm Sunday
Sunday, March 28, 2021 | Palm Sunday | Psalm 118 | Mark 11:1-11
Knox-Metropolitan United Church | Regina, SK | Treaty 4 Territory Cameron Fraser

I did one week of horse-riding camp when I was younger - and I did not like it!

I remember sitting on the swings mid-week chatting with one of the leaders while the rest of my group when on a trail ride, because I couldn't be convinced to get back on a horse and join the group.

I loosely remember earlier in the week being nipped at by the horse I would be riding, and I also have a vague memory in which 11-year-old burst into panicked tears when that same horse started to trot and I couldn't slow him back down.

This was scary because I thought I was going to fall off

But more significantly existentially crushing because it is the moment wherein I realize that, you know in the Lord of the Rings (the 80s animated movies/and books/11-year old me predated the live action franchise) or Robin Hood Prince of Thieves, or another fantasy/action fiction when one of the heroes whistle in the midst of a battle, signaling their trusted steed to come to them and then grab on with one hand and whip themselves up and into the saddle of a galloping horse

Riding Camp was the moment I realized that this was not in my future.

So, as we come to this story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem, I've always struggled to relate.

We read this morning from the book of Mark, from a special translation, and we are excited to have Dr. Bill Richards, the translator of this passage joining us in the Zoom Coffee time.

Jesus sends off two of his apprentices. "Go into the village opposite," he tells them, "and as soon as you come into it you will find a tied colt up there, that no-one has ever ridden.

Now, as the guy who sat on the swings during riding camp, I'm not really the authority on the practicalities of different mounts, but, and perhaps those here with more experience can confirm, an unriden, untrained colt, I would assume, is not the most compliant of animals.

I'd be sitting this trail ride out if it had me.

So first of all, I'm picturing the apprentices (and I wonder for those who are familiar with these stories, how it felt to hear the word disciple rendered as apprentice).

I imagine they could have had a pretty awkward experience getting the animal to come with them, maybe one is pushing from behind while the other is pulling desperately on a lead, or dangling a carrot.

I'm imagining the locals watching this whispering to one other...

Galilean fishers know nothing about land dwelling animals eh?

Do we tell them that there is another horse around back, who's a bit more friendly?

Nah, let's see how this plays out.

Apart from the potential for some slapstick comedy, there's some practical concerns here in Jesus' choice that would have given me some pause - it's never been ridden, so no one knows how it will respond - to its rider, or to the teeming crowds.

Even if Jesus were accomplished rider, and in fairness, he did pretty well with walking on stormy seas, so maybe he'd be fine, but isn't there a good chance that it wouldn't follow his lead, making the animal unpredictable, dangerous, if not to rider, certainly to the crowd?

Now when this story appears in the Gospel of Matthew, it is a donkey and her colt.

John Dominic Crossan observes that if the donkey and colt are together it's likely that the colt has not yet weaned, and so Jesus enters the city riding on a female nursing donkey with her little colt trotting along beside her.

Crossan notes that centuries earlier, in 332 BCE, Alexander the Great, having just conquered Tyre and Gaza after terrible sieges, comes to Jerusalem, which perhaps quite wisely, opened its gates to him without a fight and so the victorious Alexander enters Jerusalem on his famous war-horse, one of the most storied steeds of the Ancient world.

A jet-black stallion, that, legend has it, could be tamed by no one before Alexander, named Bucephalus - the name literally means **head** of an ox or bull. Of course, when we read the name printed, we cannot help but see *phalus*, which, I don't think is too far-off considering Alexander's machismo and dominance.

And so we have quite a contrast - nurturing and maternal/feminine contrasted with military dominance, macho/masculine.

That Christian supremacy relies on toxic and violent versions of masculinity even today has been tragically made evident these past few weeks with devastating consequences.

Marcus Borg, notes that, in close proximity to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, there would have been another procession coming in from the opposite side of the city.

This story is placed in the narrative at the time of Passover, and our siblings in the Beth Jacob Synagogue and Regina's Hasidic community began their Pesach celebrations last night.

This festival celebrating freedom from slavery in Egypt.

Of course, in the time of Mark's narrative Jerusalem, and all of Jewish Palestine is not living in freedom, but under Roman occupation. And so it was customary, each year for the Roman Governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, who normally lived on the coast, to come into the Capital, of course bringing calvary, infantry and chariots - reinforcements for the imperial garrison, a reminder of the might and violence of Rome.

Another notable contrast.

And then people start laying down their cloaks - the Hebrew imagination might recall Jehu, one of the heroes of old whose story is told in the Second book of Kings where he brings down the brutal house of Ahab - when he is anointed king, the army *hurriedly took their cloaks and spread them for him on the bare steps; and they blew the trumpet.*

And as people are laying down their cloaks before Jesus, some pull down branches cut from trees, it's the text of the Gospel of John that names as palm leaves.

In so doing, another great Hebrew story of heroism, the uprising against the Seleucid Empire who rule Jerusalem in the wake of Alexander the Great, which is recorded in the book of 1 Maccabees, written in between the Old and New Testaments

In it, as the Hebrew army re-enters Jerusalem following their victory they do so *with a chorus of praise and the waving of palm branches.*

Cloaks and branches are laid down

Both in front and behind, people started shouting,

"Hosanna! (which in Aramaic means "relief")

Hosanna! God bless the one coming in YHWH's name!

God bless the one coming with the rule of his ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest!"

Some folks render Hosanna as save us – and I am interested in the implications of Bill's choice of *relief*.

There's longing and expectation.

And if this crowd is, as many suggest, made up primarily of the peasantry, many of whom perhaps followed Jesus from the rural villages in which the challenge of Roman colonialism effected them more drastically, it is a pretty vulnerable crowd, and the cries for relief feel perhaps quite tenuous.

Will they in fact find the relief they seek.

Relief like ancestors found when brought forth from Egypt, or when the house of Ahab fell, or when the Maccabees prevailed?

Yet there is not only contrast to Alexander and Pilate but also a subversion of the force with which Jehu and the Maccabees brought forth their liberation. There is a vulnerability, not only in the crowd, but also on the part of the rider.

We're living in a moment of vulnerable hope right now.

Vaccination numbers climbing at the same time of infections and variants of concern.

In the Early Middle Ages, as Christianity arrives in the British Isle's, the burgeoning Celtic Christian movement is understood to have woven, perhaps more so than in other areas, their existing mythology, and animist reverence with Christian language and liturgy.

One of the names Celtic Christianity offers to the Holy Spirit is "*An Geadh-Glas*".

The wild goose.

Something that cannot be tracked or tamed.

I think that the Celts would have appreciated Mark's intentionality of naming the untamed nature of Jesus' steed.

With its potential for wildness.

And Matthew's invitation to imagine the divine feminine centered in this moment.

Our opening prayer came from the Rev. Bruce Sanguin's book *If Darwin Prayed: Prayers for Evolutionary Mystics*.

Fourteen billion years it has taken
to come to this One,
arriving as servant,

What joy is ours
as we take our place
in the great procession of life,
heralding and blessing

What I love about Sanguin's prayers in this book is how they invite us to read the Christian Tradition within the great beautiful language of evolutionary cosmology.

Sanguin explains that he imagines Palm Sunday narrative, from an evolutionary Christian spirituality as *Jesus consenting to the pull of the cosmos*.

It's not that humanity as pinnacle of history but participant.

Humble listener and learner.

Grateful guest.

Joyous dancer to another's song.

Not creating out of nothing, but entering into that which is ongoing, yet broader in scope than our normal metrics.

As we enter into Holy Week

For the second time under conditions of intentional isolation and distance.

Perhaps with a different sort of uncertainty than we held last year having watched waves crest and wane and crest again.

As the world around beckons us from winter into spring

And, alas, as our particular area faces what certainly feels to me one of the more concerning trajectories of infection,

The vulnerable hope of the crowd held in a paradoxical tension with the potential of the wild goose like unriden colt and the irresistible pull of the cosmos match some of the complexity I feel within my own heart.

A longing for relief sometimes at odds with

Concern and caution

And a desire to trust that there is that cosmic beckoning, to which we can consent

While recognize that our habits and so much of that which has brought us to this moment have been the methodologies of Pilate and Alexander that which have sought to draw straight lines of imposed orders and maintaining dominance, whose impotence to bring forth life for the flourishing of all are being seen more clearly.

We come to Holy Week once again.

We prepare to sit in vigil, witnessing to the violence of empire, and then the possibility of resurrection.

We bear witness in our stories that we might recognize the same in our world.

May we remember that while our individual and congregational vigil keeping seem so small, that if we are open to that pull of the cosmos to which the Christ in Jesus consents, that we share in vigil with the countless crowds who cry for relief from cycles of violence and exclusion, ecosystems and species, unyielding economic systems and any number of individual hurts...

Easter is possibility...may we consent to it's call to us, it's pull on us, it's demand upon us.

Again and Again we draw on courage.

this One
who comes in your name,
and all who are coming

with a song of holiness on their lips
and a yearning for wholeness in their hearts.

Blessed,
blessed,
blessed