

“The Lord Hath Need Of Them”

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem & had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find an ass tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me.

If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord hath need of them.’
And he will send them immediately. ”

This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on an ass, and on a colt, the foal of an ass.”

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the ass and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.

A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?”

The crowds were saying,
“This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

The Lord Hath Need Of Them

Matthew 21:1-11

April 2, 2023

Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

I.

I begin today by telling you that, of late, I have been emboldened. Emboldened by *you*, as a congregation. You have also managed to amaze me, delight me, energize me, warm my heart, send my spirit soaring, and humble me with your graciousness toward others. Let's just start with being emboldened, though, and see where it takes us.

Today's somewhat banal sermon title, "The Lord Hath Need of Them," was, I admit, a rather distant second choice. I opted for it, however, because the first choice was somewhat risqué in a rated PG-13 kind of way; especially given that it is Palm Sunday. I will save us the step of asking if you would like to know it, being fairly confident of how you would respond, so I am going to just go ahead and tell you. What I *really* wanted to use for a title, is: "Being an Ass for the Lord."

II.

Today's scripture reading from Matthew is the very familiar story of Palm Sunday; with a crowd spreading cloaks on the road, and cutting branches from the trees to spread on the road and everyone shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" Quite a scene, to be sure, as Jesus triumphantly enters Jerusalem on his way to his testing in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Last Supper, the betrayal by Judas, his arrest, the denial by Peter, his examination before Pilot who washes his hands of the whole affair after many from the same Palm Sunday crowd shouted "Crucify him!", his journey to the cross, his suffering and death and, finally, his resurrection from the dead on the third day; with Mary Magdalene finding, not a body to anoint on that first Easter Sunday morning, but the Risen Christ.

III.

We are getting ahead of ourselves, however. Returning to the story of Palm Sunday, we are meant to understand that this rather odd spectacle is seen as the fulfillment of the words of the prophet Ezekiel who foretold the coming of the King of Zion, saying:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass.

For the Gospel writer, in this case Matthew writing to a Jewish Christian audience, it was imperative to understand Jesus, a lowly carpenter from Nazareth, within the larger context of the story of God's redemptive actions throughout the history of Israel; and, in fulfillment of the covenants made to Noah, Abraham and Moses. Jesus doesn't somehow come out of the blue but, rather, is the long-prophesied and long-awaited Savior and Messiah. Jesus is the One who was *always* coming, and *now* is here.

IV.

That said, for me the more interesting issue that gets raised by the events of Palm Sunday has to do with what is sometimes termed the "Omnipotence Paradox." This is commonly expressed in a rather simplistic and all too abstract riddle: *Can God, who is understood to be omnipotent, that is to say all-powerful, create a stone which God cannot lift?* If God *can* create such a stone, then God is not all powerful, since even God cannot lift it. On the other hand, if God *cannot* create a stone that cannot be lifted, then God is not all powerful, since God cannot create an unliftable stone. Either way, God is *not* all powerful. While this is only a marginally meaningful mental exercise, it begs the more provocative question of why God bothers creating stones at all? Or, more to the point, why does God bother? If God is all-powerful why bother doing *anything* other than what God wants to do? Why not just get to it?

V.

While this question might be rightly asked at any number of points along the way in the unfolding history of the Bible, from the 40 years of wilderness wandering before the Promised Land could be reached to the necessity of the cross for the salvation of the world, this morning we will limit our focus to the aforementioned ass.

Could God have written the story of the redemptive work of Christ on the Cross without the assistance of the ass? Well, of course God could have; after all, God is omnipotent, all-powerful. So while the ass did not dictate the outcome of the story, the ass serves to help the story to be understood for what it is. With God, it is never just about the outcome, it is about the process, the parts, and the people who cause, create and culminate in the outcome. God uses the ass not only to carry Jesus into Jerusalem and usher in the ensuing events which would unfold there, the ass is used to carry the story as well.

VI.

The real paradox of God's omnipotence is why God *needs* such seemingly small sub-plots to illuminate and advance the story-line?

Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey (an ass) tied (there), and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me.

*If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord hath **need** of them." And he will send them immediately."*

Changing the subject for a moment, this week I had a couple of interesting conversations with two people whom I have never met or with whom never previously conversed. Melba is from the Dexter Presbyterian Church and is a member the Presbytery's nominating committee. We spoke Sunday after church and she asked if I would serve on the Coordinating Council, a kind of an executive committee. Though I gave it great thought and prayerful consideration, that evening I called her back to decline the invitation. I am simply having too much fun right now to spend the next three years aggravating myself (and others, I'm sure).

VII.

Melba was very understanding, she "gets" it. Which while not necessarily unexpected, was very much appreciated. Moreover, we got to talking about the Presbytery and the plight of many of its congregations, including her own, which is daunting if not downright bleak. In contrast, I shared with her a few of the many things going on here at our church. This was not an attempt to brag but, rather, to illustrate what is possible; even in this day and age, even in this part of the world. She was both shocked and delighted, as well as congratulatory and complimentary.

So much so, that I admit *I* was shocked to recognize the diminishment of expectations so prevalent in many churches these days. It was a bit of an “A Ha” moment for me. I certainly understand that we have a *very* good thing going here on the Park, but Melba caused me to consider *why* this might be the case and *what* might be the cause?

VIII.

The following day, on Monday evening, I was checking messages on the church answering machine prior to the start of the Session meeting. One was from David, the former Executive of the Northern New York Presbytery, who moved to Idaho a few years before I even arrived here; so we are going back a ways. He was looking for the contact information for the former secretary in the Presbytery office during his time here. Why he called our church, I’ve no idea.

I had always heard David was a good guy, so after the Session meeting ended I promptly called him and gave him a lead on how to reach this person. We, too, got to talking. Not just about this presbytery, but about the larger church and the challenges we are facing along with all the other so-called “Main-Line” Protestant denominations. I also told him some of the things happening at our church; and, in a subsequent email conversation, sent him a copy of this month’s newsletter.

IX.

While he, too, was amazed, his strongest reaction was that of joy. Which, I will tell you, is a very nice emotion to be able to kindle in another person. It was as if some long-dormant conviction of his was suddenly dusted off and proven true; that it IS possible for a church to thrive. The evidence was right there in front of him, in words and pictures and numbers. Moreover, that our church is not some exception to the rule, we are an example of what he doggedly believed the rule was always meant to be.

While this conversation was certainly affirming, it also served to deepen my puzzlement about *why* this might be the case and *what* might be the cause with respect to the “something” that is happening here in this congregation. To reference Stephen Stills, “what it is ain’t exactly clear.” All week, I’ve been endeavoring to bring some clarity to the question. While what I have come up with won’t necessarily surprise anyone, you may find hearing it a little bit shocking.

X.

Objectively, one might conclude we are an example of the benefits that come with a long-term, stable, and fruitful pastorate. I would in no way disagree with this assessment. In fact, I would push it a step further and, putting any attempt at false modesty aside, underscore that the particular pastor absolutely has an important role to play. Results matter in the real world, and they should matter in the church. Being a pastor who is a nice guy, or a great gal, is not enough. Just as it is not enough in any other of life's endeavors.

While there are particular gifts and skills for ministry which might come into play, the threshold every minister needs to cross is to put in the hard work on the job and on one's self, to be authentic and honest, be grateful in understanding who pays your salary and, especially, show up when you are needed (even when you're not necessarily called). Does any of this help to clarify what is going on here in this church? Yes, of course it does.

XI.

It would be an egregious mistake, though, to stop there; and there *are* many who might be tempted to look no further. Truth is, not only is what I've just described only a part of the "something" that is happening here, it is the very least of it; and, I'm uniquely suited to tell you why. It just so happens that I *am* the pastor in this particular long-term, stable, and fruitful pastorate.

Hear me when I tell you, I would not have stayed here long-term if not for those who constitute this congregation, both then and now. Please don't be under the impression that *I* am doing you some kind of favor, it is all of *you* who are doing the gift giving to me (just ask Linda). There would be no stability in this church if not for all of you, certainly now but *especially* then. You have rounded my rough edges with a gentle love (just ask Pastor Donna). Yes, I may plow some fields, but it is all of you who plant the seeds and bring in the harvest; toiling every day in the Lord's vineyard (just look around).

XII.

As I stated when I began today's sermon, you amaze me, delight me, energize me, warm my heart, send my spirit soaring and humble me with your graciousness toward others. You also embolden me. So much so that I will risk sharing with you the point of clarity I reached this week: you are all a bunch of asses...for the Lord...and you *know* it. See, I *told* you you would be shocked. I'm willing to bet, though, you are in no way surprised and have figured out where this is going.

Though there is much we might discern from reading the story of Palm Sunday found in Matthew 21, today's "take away" is that the ass had a role to play in ushering in the salvific work of the cross and God's redemptive plan our world. In the same way, each of you and all of us together, have a role to play in the "something" that is happening not only here in our church, but in all the world.

XIII.

Yes, we are a relatively small sub-plot and in no way dictate the outcome of the story; and mercifully so. Apparently, though, God hath need of us to illuminate and advance the story-line; and, serve to help the story to be understood for what it is. Which is the most intriguing example of the "Omnipotence Paradox" yet to be imagined: can God create a child of the divine who is not "needed" to help carry the gift of salvation into the world and usher in the ensuing events which will unfold, here, in our very own lives?

I know that some days, we all look around at the events happening in our communities, our nation and this world and want to shout, "Come, Lord Jesus!" If you *are* all-powerful, God, why not just get to it? Well, maybe that is *exactly* the "something" that is happening here and it will never be more clear to us than that. Amen.