Sermon 04-14-19

Palm What?

Luke 19:28-40

**Sermon Starter**

Okay, this is Palm Sunday, but given that Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem riding that donkey happened about 2,000 years ago, how do we know that it actually took place on a Sunday?

You might assume that the gospels tell us so, but they don’t. All we have is a single clue in John, and that comes from putting the events in two verses together. **GRAPHIC: John 12:1 says that six days before Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, to the home of Lazarus**, and **GRAPHIC: John 12:12 says that “the next day” Jesus came into Jerusalem.**

But the start of Passover is always on the same date on the Hebrew calendar, meaning that it could have been any day of the week, depending on what year the crucifixion took place.

So, to say that Jesus entered Jerusalem on a Sunday is largely tradition based on assumptions about the year Jesus died (some say A.D. 30) and the fact that all four gospels agree that the crucifixion took place on Friday of that week (Matthew 27:62; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54; John 19:31).

**Monday?**

Let’s not get burdened with the details, and just put it out there: Some biblical scholars have suggested that the procession into Jerusalem took place on Monday.[[1]](#endnote-1)

But, of course, what day of the week it took place doesn’t really matter, except perhaps from the perspective of the people who rejoiced when Jesus rode into the city. If it was Monday, it was a weekday, not the Sabbath, which, for Jews, was sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Thus, it was certainly not a “holy day” in the religious sense of the term.

And if it was Sunday, it still wasn’t a holy day, a religious day, like Sunday is for us. Sunday would have been like our Monday, the first day of the work week, the day after the Sabbath rest — time to sweep the stoop, open the shop, wash the clothes, go to the market, repair the oxcart, get the bread in the oven, deal with matters left over from the previous week that had been put aside for the Sabbath and so forth. Besides, there was the Passover coming in a few days. Lots to do!

Regardless of the actual day of the week, for the people who greeted Jesus as he rode into the city, it was a Monday-ish kind of day.

For us, there’s a sense in which Mondays, as the first day of the work week, symbolize the business of life continuing, of resuming after a brief weekend or a Sabbath pause. Life going on, things getting back to normal, back to routine.

Many people find it hard to drag themselves to work on Mondays. It’s such a tribulation that the very effort to survive Mondays has become the subject of numerous songs, many in the blues tradition, including hits recorded by T-Bone Walker, B.B. King, Eric Clapton, Mississippi John Hurt and Muddy Waters. **GRAPHIC: “Rainy days and Mondays always get me down,”** sang the Carpenters. **GRAPHIC: “Monday, Monday, can’t trust that day” — Mamas and Papas hit.**

But for many people, particularly those with type-A personalities, **GRAPHIC: Monday is a pleasure, a day to attack what needs to be done, to jump back in with both feet, to crank things up again.**

**What was Jesus thinking?**

So, what was Jesus doing on that day? Why would he make a gesture so dramatic that the crowds went wild and praised God? The Pharisees, seeing this, asked Jesus to stop them — and by implication, to reject their accolades. What was Jesus thinking?

For years, the church has called this event “The Triumphal Entry,” but that doesn’t fit the biblical description very well. Clearly, it was not a covert operation. There was nothing “black ops” about it. Jesus didn’t slip quietly into the city under the cover of darkness with a team of highly trained operatives whose former occupation was fishing for perch in the Sea of Galilee.

No, Jesus enters in plain sight on a busy workday. It was an overt operation.

And why did Jesus follow it the next day with another dramatic public act: **GRAPHIC: the “cleansing” of the temple, where he literally whipped up a frenzy?**

We don’t know Jesus’ motivation, but it does seem that he was forcing the authorities to deal with him.

Go big or go home. Jesus went big.

He was lighting a fuse that exploded later in the week with the bang of the soldiers’ hammers as they drove nails into his hands and feet.

Both the entry into the city and the brouhaha in the temple defy the Monday mindset: **GRAPHIC: “No, you can’t carry on as usual!” he seems to be shouting. “My kingdom is not of this world, so don’t lose it in the mundane of Monday.”**

His behavior sort of doesn’t make sense. Usually, Jesus did not want to be the center of attention. Often, like after he’d healed someone, he’d caution the excited person, “Now, don’t tell anyone about this.” But maybe that’s the point. Jesus took dramatic, out-of-character steps to make something happen — not his death — something else.

**Jesus forces the issue**

New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan suggests that as Passover approached, Jesus came to Jerusalem intentionally “to make twin demonstrations, first against Roman imperial control over the City of Peace and, second, against Roman imperial control over the temple. … In other words, against the (sub) governor Pilate and his high-priest Caiaphas.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

As Crossan explains it, Jesus intended his very public entry into Jerusalem on the donkey as not only criticism of Roman power but a caricature of it.

Because people were flooding the city from all over the world for Passover, Pilate would be sure to have traveled from his home base in Caesarea, bringing with him a large contingent of troops.

**GRAPHIC: So, Pilate rides into the city in advance of the Passover on a powerful black warhorse bedecked with colors, banners, insignia and armor.**

**GRAPHIC: Jesus arrives on a donkey.**

All four gospels tell the Palm Monday story, and the lectionary’s choice for it this year is from Luke, but in Matthew’s version, he adds the comment that Jesus’ action in choosing to ride a donkey with her colt beside her fulfills the words of the prophet Zechariah **GRAPHIC: “Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”**

And why? To **GRAPHIC: “cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations ...” (Zechariah 9:9-10).**

Contrast Pilate on his stallion with Jesus on a nursing donkey mare with her colt beside her, and you see the intended message: “Peace on earth, yes, but not peace by Rome’s violent victory, rather peace by God’s non-violent justice,” Crossan says.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Likewise, Jesus also forced the issue when he created a disturbance in the temple. By driving out the sellers and moneychangers from the temple, he acted out a parable, says Crossan. The temple was the house of God for all nations, but the temple and its high priest were allowed to function only under the control of Rome, and Jesus’ action with the whip declared this unacceptable to God.

**GRAPHIC: Jesus “symbolically destroys the temple’s fiscal basis by overturning the tables where monies were changed into the standard donation coinage,” Crossan says.**

Is Crossan right about Jesus’ intention with these two actions? Since none of the gospels tell us otherwise, he may well be. In both cases, Jesus was forcing the issue.

**Today’s Monday issues**

We live in an age when a lot of issues need to be forced into the Mondays of life. We may not like it, but the issues have been forced, and we are compelled to address them or ignore them.

The #MeToo movement, for example, has exposed the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault in the workplace and other environments. (**GRAPHIC: The church has its own version of #MeToo called #SilenceIsNotSpiritual**. The UMC is living in the midst of its own issue, **GRAPHIC: the aftermath of the recent General Conference. Only after Easter will the issues be heard.)**

We are forced to address the issues raised by whistleblowers — employees or insiders — who become aware of wrongdoing or dangerous practices within a corporation or agency or even a church, and then make the information public so it can be stopped.

We can’t ignore protestors who put themselves in legal jeopardy or risk physical violence to say that something isn’t right, fair, for the common good or pleasing God.

These are some examples. You might think of others.

What issues would Jesus force us to consider on our Palm Monday?

When Jesus rides into our lives, whether in a church on a Sunday or on the street on a Monday, he also forces an issue for us.

**GRAPHIC: He calls us to make a decision, to follow him, to trust him and maybe even to confront injustice, expose danger or challenge arrogance that rides over others. It’s our Monday. What will we decide?**

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. “Chronology of the Holy Week and resurrection appearances in the gospels.” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX Nashville: Abingdon, 1995, 704-705.  [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Crossan, John Dominic. “Why did Jesus go to Jerusalem? A Holy Week reflection.” *HuffPost*, March 31, 2012, updated May 31, 2012. Retrieved 3-13-19  [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the gospels Really Teach About Jesus’s Final Days In Jerusalem* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006) 2-5 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)