

“Laying Down Our Cloaks”
Mark 11:1-11
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Preached March 29, 2015 at San José, Costa Rica

A large crowd was gathered that day, 8000 by some count and still more were arriving. The early arrivals had packed in up front. Excitement was building, and the hum of the crowd grew. Many had come a long way and were anxious to see the curious attraction. Local security officials were concerned about the size and nature of the crowd, and had tried to put measures in place to avoid a disturbance, but they were ill-prepared for what took place next. As long-hoped for words reached their ears, the crowd, as one, surged forward, but there was no room for them all. Yet those in the back could not see what was happening up front and so in their excitement, they pushed even harder to get up front. And when people began to fall, the crowd simply surged forward on top on them, trampling them underfoot, an obstacle below the same as an obstacle ahead of them. When it was all over, eleven people were dead of asphyxia, and another 23 lay injured. But the show went on.

And what were the words that spurred the crowd on, that drove them into such a frenzy that they lost all control of their faculties? Were those words, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord”? or “Blessed is the coming Kingdom of our ancestor David!”? Was it, “There he is! There’s Jesus!”? Not exactly. They were more like “The Who! The concert is starting!”

although it could have been “Welcome to Walmart” too. No, the event in question was not Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but a concert by the British rock band, The Who, in 1979 in Cincinnati, Ohio at which some of the tightly packed general admission crowd waiting at the doors mistook the band’s sound check for the beginning of the show, and began their stampede, thinking nothing of their fellow concertgoers who were unfortunate enough to fall to the floor. Yes, we’ll trample each other to death for a front row seat, or a fifty percent discount on Black Friday. All you have to do is say a few magic words, and our instincts will do the rest.

To be fair, some of the people in these cases of death by trampling were probably just trying to save their own lives, to make sure they didn’t end up on the bottom of the pile. What choice did they have but to continue running? But most probably believed that it was just survival of the fittest, that if you can’t run with the big dogs, you’d better stay home. After a crowd shouting “push the doors in” did just that at a Walmart on Black Friday in 2008 and trampled to death a Walmart employee, when told “they had to leave, that an employee got killed, people were yelling, ‘I’ve been in line since Friday morning!’ ” and just kept on shopping. No such tragedy or attitude was reported when Jesus entered Jerusalem, but the situation could have gotten out of hand. As it is, later in the week, the darker side of the crowd mentality took over and the cheers of the first Palm

Sunday turned into the jeers of the first Black Friday, and Jesus was the one trampled to death by a miscarriage of justice.

Given the cries of Hosanna that accompanied his entrance into Jerusalem, it is clear that some in the city, maybe even many, believed that their King had finally arrived. Their shouts came from Psalms used for the entrance of the kings as did the practice of spreading cloaks or branches for the king to ride in upon. They clearly had high hopes for a brighter future under a new regime. But why would this have been so important for them? They had a “king” in Caesar. He was about as powerful as they come, with armies the likes of which good old King David could never have mustered. There was peace for the first time in a long time, even if it was peace that came with the price of a military occupation. Sure, taxes were high, and it wasn’t exactly a democracy, but hey, things were stable. Why did they need a King riding in on a donkey? Well, maybe it’s because they felt like the donkey.

Maybe you remember the classic Palm Sunday poem by G.K. Chesterton called “The Donkey”. It goes like this:

When fishes flew and forests walked
And figs grew upon thorn,
Some moment when the moon was blood
Then surely I was born.
With monstrous head and sickening cry
And ears like errant wings,
The devil’s walking parody
On all four-footed things.

The tattered outlaw of the earth,
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,
I keep my secret still.
Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.

Yes, this people needed a king who cared about them. This crowd needed Jesus. They needed someone who could take their curse away, give them hope, someone to treat them not like the misfit donkeys of the world but as the beautiful and noble sons and daughters of Adam they were created to be. They needed for a lifetime the dignity and the compassion and the courage Jesus showed for those three short years he spent with them. It is no wonder they were as excited as teenagers headed to a rock concert. If they'd started a stampede to get close to him, you couldn't have blamed them. And so they did what they had always done. They cried loud hosannas and they threw their cloaks upon the road in front of him, and hoped that Jesus would trample the Romans who had been trampling on them. The only problem was that Jesus came not to trample, but to be trampled.

In one way or another, we are all just as wretched and pathetic as that donkey. If it is not poverty or disease or domestic abuse or the lack of an education, it's having too high an opinion of ourselves, or being judgmental or selfish or wasteful. We are either the Pharisee or the tax collector. Remember that parable Jesus told? "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a

tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ And Jesus said, “I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” We are all caught up in the cycle of sin the prophet Amos described when we prophesied, “Thus says the LORD: ‘For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes--they that trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted.’ ” We’re all donkeys. Some of us are just already aware that we are.

Theologically, we can affirm that God loves the donkey just as much any animal considered from our human point of view as being either lovelier or uglier, but we don’t always think about ourselves the way that our Creator does. Our self-image doesn’t match the divine image. We either think too highly or too lowly of ourselves, we trample others or we get trampled, all while we spend our lives seeking or waiting for that one fleeting hour in which that donkey took delight, when its feet trod upon something soft and it felt at last worthy.

Back in the sixth century, Saint Andrew, Bishop of Crete, preached a provocative Palm Sunday image that might still inform us today. He said, “Come then, let us run with Jesus as he presses on to his passion. Let us imitate those who have gone out to meet him, not scattering olive branches or garments or palms in his path, but spreading ourselves before him as best we can, with humility of soul and upright purpose. So we may welcome the Word as he comes, so may God who cannot be contained within any bounds, be contained within us. So it is ourselves that we must spread under Christ’s feet, not coats or lifeless branches or shoots of trees, matter which wastes away and delights the eye only for a few brief hours. But we have clothed ourselves with Christ’s grace, or with the whole Christ - ‘for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ’ - so let us spread ourselves like coats under his feet.”

Normally, we are the ones doing the trampling under foot, whether from greed or from fear. But as followers of Christ, we are called to be the ones trampled, not in the sense of just allowing ourselves to be walked on so others can do whatever they want, but so that on our backs, others might be lifted up. Isn’t this what Jesus did for us? Isn’t this what Gandhi and King and so many others in the non-violence movement did for others? Isn’t this what those who care for young children or parents with Alzheimer’s do for others? Isn’t this what we can do for others when we see them struggling with depression or doubt or even hubris or pride? Christ came for the wretched of every kind, not that they might endure

their whole lives for that “One far fierce hour and sweet,” but that they might have abundant life, divine life. And if we can, by laying ourselves down as Christ laid himself down, give the world’s donkeys something soft to walk upon, not just for one sweet hour, but for a season, or better yet a lifetime, then we will have followed Jesus not only into Jerusalem, but to the cross and on to resurrection and glory. That’s our task this Holy Week, to remember how we have trampled others, to give thanks for the one willing to be trampled for our sakes, and to lay down not only our coats for the world, but our very lives. Amen.