

“Yah, Mule!”
Luke 19:28-40
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Wait a minute! I thought this was Palm Sunday but there aren't any palms in this story. I guess we'll have to change it to Cloak Sunday, since cloaks were what Luke tells us the multitude of the disciples were laying down before him as he rode down the road from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem. And where are the "hosannas?" Well, the palm branches and the hosannas are found in the other Gospel stories of this entrance into Jerusalem, but in Luke, there are no palms, here, no hosannas, nothing but horse thieves and unbridled enthusiasts.

Jesus is, as usual, pretty nervy, sending out two of the disciples to do a little four legged robbery. Now, where I come from, horse stealin' is a hangin' offense. So it's no wonder Jesus ran into trouble with the authorities. Think about it for a minute. When was the last time you went to the airport to rent a car and they let you have it when you told them some crazy faith healer said to tell them it was OK? Somehow they got away with it, maybe because it wasn't rideable anyway for Luke tells us that the colt had never been ridden. And so if getting your steed for free without getting arrested wasn't enough, the fact that he could ride a green horse should tell you plenty about Jesus' divine nature.

This, to me, is the most incredible part of the story and the part that has earned Jesus' my undying admiration. You see, I grew up with a horse crazed

sister, who, if she was here today would tell you, with more relish than I can muster, the story of when her brother tried to ride her horse. But you will have to settle for my version of the story and an insight into what an amazing thing it was that Jesus survived the trip down the Mount of Olives.

My sister now owns about twenty horses, or rather, those twenty horses own her, but back in the days when she had but one and guarded it protectively, I used to beg her to let me take it out for a ride. It was not a large horse, in fact I think it was actually classified as a pony, but it was able to jump the requisite fences and trot around the ring looking pretty. It seemed like such a tame little horsey. After months of pleading, she finally relented and allowed me to take it out for a spin. So we saddled up the unsuspecting Marshmallow (which was its name, not its disposition as I was about to learn) and we took her out in the ring. With a lot of help, I climbed on board and began to walk the horse around the ring. Now, for a seventeen year old boy, walking a horse around and around in a circle doesn't compare favorably with taking a Chevy out around the block, so after a few trips, I was getting a little board. So when I was at the opposite end of the ring, far away from my sister, I decided I would show that little horsey just who was the boss. So I dug in my heels and yelled "Yah, mule!"

Needless to say, I quickly learned that it was in fact the horse that was in charge and I was but a poorly mannered brute on its back. Marshmallow took off

down the center of the ring, jumped a fence while simultaneously bucking, vaulted over an unfortunately placed barrel, went straight for the open gate of the arena, ran down the path to the stable, and came to a screeching halt in front of her stall. The way I ended up, it looked like I was auditioning for a position with the circus because I was hanging upside down under the poor horse's neck swearing that I would personally see to it that this horse ended up at the glue factory! My sister to this day contends that this is the funniest story of our mutual childhood. I contend that it was one of the most theologically significant. Besides learning a valuable lesson in humility, Palm Sunday has never been the same for me. That Jesus rode an untrained, green horse, down a steep hill, amidst crowds of cheering people throwing things under foot, and survived, is truly a miracle in my book.

Now, the multitude of his disciples who were accompanying him into town probably did not know about his horseback riding prowess, which means that they were cheering him on about something else, and Luke tells us that they were responding to the deeds of power they had seen Jesus do, and using kingly language to do it. That acclamation they were using, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" comes from Psalm 118, which we just heard, and it was one of the psalms used for the enthronement of the King, and so the people that day had

decided to hang their hopes on Jesus as the one who would liberate them and restore Jerusalem and Israel to its former glory. As we shall learn later this Holy Week, they were sadly mistaken.

Now it's true that they had the wrong idea about what kind of King Jesus was, but, in at least one sense, they had the right idea about what to do with him, even if it wasn't exactly Jesus' way of doing things. He was indeed praiseworthy even if he might be the type to shun praise. Those people throwing down their cloaks in the street and shouting the royal psalms did not have the benefit of our hindsight, but they recognized something that we don't always seem to recognize: that Jesus Christ is worthy of our unbridled enthusiasm, if you'll pardon the equestrian pun. We are often rather sedate in our appreciation of Jesus; we rarely scream for him like we scream at rock concerts or sporting events, and indeed, people have been locked up for less.

But while they were right that Jesus was praiseworthy, they seemed to fall into the same trap that I did with my sister's horse, Marshmallow. I read this story as equal parts adoration and wishful thinking run amok, the chants as much propaganda as praise. Although Jesus had certainly done many wondrous and wonderful things, he certainly could not be accused of leading people on to anoint him king. And so, not content to ride around the Holy Land at Jesus' pace, when he entered Jerusalem, his admirers used the opportunity to dig their heels in and

try to force him to do what they wanted him to do: to pick up the pace, to be more exciting, to be the king they wanted him to be. It's as if they dug in their collective Israelite heels and shouted "Yah, mule!," to spur him on to accept their expectations and fulfill their aspirations. Maybe he would begin to believe it as much as they did if they just shouted it long enough and loud enough. But Jesus' pace was different than theirs because his timetable was the same as God's, and not always in synch with theirs. His methods were rooted in the divine purpose rather than the political solution. Thanks be to God that Jesus did not respond like Marshmallow, bucking them off, and heading for his stall, but that he endured their impatience, and their impertinence, and their misguided ideas about what kind of mischief God works in the world, and kept plodding along to the cross. Indeed, ultimately, it was Jesus who was bucked off and trampled by political expediency and then dragged around the political arena.

The thought of Jesus as ruler of all, as king, or president or prime minister is not only an ancient longing. There is a certain comfort in the idea of someone as righteous, just, spiritual, and compassionate as Jesus as the leader of our nations. We want God to be in charge, not just spiritually, but when laws are broken and trust betrayed, when evil reigns with impunity. Our current leaders don't seem to be producing the kind of community God has promised us. There is still war, and still hunger, and there's more corruption and less civility. If we ever

wonder why theocracies and fundamentalism take root, it is because those human reasonable needs for political and economic security have been manipulated by those with the skill or power to cast themselves as the next best thing to God on earth. But as we've seen, these regimes have not eliminated those societal ills that germinated the fear of which gave them so much power, and they often create others. Even if it were possible, I would submit that the world would not be any better if Jesus had been the King everyone wanted. He might have driven out the Romans, but at what price? He might have brought peace to Jerusalem, but for how long? He might have created economic prosperity, but at what cost? If Jesus had been just another King, there would be no hope for peace, no hope for justice, no hope for abundant life because these things can't be achieved by the kind of king those in Jerusalem had in mind, but only by the kind of king who turns things on their head. He might have defeated a temporal evil, but he wouldn't have defeated death itself.

I said before that I marveled at Jesus being able to ride an unbroken colt, a feat some might describe as miraculous. Maybe this passage is not your typical Biblical miracle story but I find the miracle of this Palm Sunday entry is that it gives us a way out of the uniquely human trap of believing that power, violence, might, and persuasion are the only effective ways of achieving meaningful change in our lives and our communities. The miracle of this Palm Sunday entry is that

Jesus has redefined the definitions of kingship and leadership. The miracle of this Palm Sunday entry is that against all odds, Jesus has shown his people a better way to make their communities places where God's shalom can truly be experienced in all its fullness. To experience that miracle, let me suggest that we take the opportunity they missed back in Jerusalem of crying "Hosanna in the highest" and let the words and actions of our Lord make a triumphal entry into our lives. "Hosanna" means, literally, "save, we pray." Indeed, may God save us from those who persecute us, but also, may God save us from ourselves. May God save us from believing that what we want is what the world needs. May God save us from believing that if we dig our heels hard enough into God's side that we can make God do our bidding. May God save us from an impatience with God's schedule and help us to enjoy the ride God is taking us on. May God save us from casting our expectations and aspirations on that which does not endure. And may God save us from all those things, so that our praise of Jesus Christ might be authentic, and genuine, and from the heart.

We need look no further than the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper to see what makes Jesus so praiseworthy. You see, no ordinary King would invite mere commoners to sit together at the table. No ordinary King would prepare a joyful feast and open wide the doors of the banquet hall to any and all comers. But the kind of King Jesus is is revealed in the offering of his body and blood for saints

and sinners alike, for the washed and unwashed, for the deserving and the undeserving, for the Jew and the Greek, for male and female, for slave and free. This is what we celebrate in the Sacrament. May we praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power we have seen, and will see, as we share the sacrament at the invitation of our savior. Amen.