

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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April 5, 2009
Palm/Passion Sunday
Mark 11:1-11

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Jerusalem

A funny thing happened on the way to Jerusalem. . . .

If we had lived in first century Palestine, we'd have been laughing all the way with Jesus as he rode his colt from Bethany to Jerusalem. This is a funny story. If we weren't so conditioned to think of the Bible as a serious book, it might be easier for us to recognize the humor of the situation.

Have you ever thought about what makes something funny? Here's one definition: humor either plays a trick on the mind or paints a picture which is ludicrous or incongruous. This story paints a humorous picture. What Jesus and his followers did that day was to stage some comic theater, street theater. Think carnival, think Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

The scene is loaded with incongruity. We laugh when utterly disparate ideas co-mingle. Such as Snoopy, the dog, decorating his doghouse for Christmas--or, to use a more current example, pink flamingos on a snow-covered Montana lawn. The incongruity of these pictures makes us chuckle because we don't expect these things to be together. The bigger the contrast, and the more complete the joining of the unexpected, the more we laugh. Some say that incongruity is the basis of all humor.

It is incongruous that a carpenter from Galilee, turned itinerant healer and teacher, would act like a conquering hero and come to Jerusalem at festival time. That this man who walked all the way to Bethany would suddenly choose to ride the last few miles. That his friends would lay down their cloaks and branches and call out "Hosanna!" which means "Save us!" is a picture of absurdity.

And like much good humor, there was a whole lot of planning to pull off this seemingly spontaneous act, to bring together these contrasting images to make the celebration parade feel like a real party. The instructions to the disciples about getting the colt are the biggest clue to this forethought. Jesus knew exactly where the colt would be, he knew the kind of negotiations the disciples would need to make in order to borrow the animal from its owners, and he knew the symbolic impact of using this young animal as his "steed." This is a carefully orchestrated event, a grand entry full of irony and incongruity. For at the very same time, on the west side of the city, the Roman governor, Pilate, was staging a grand entry as well, a parade worthy of an imperial power. With horses and weapons and military drums drumming, the Empire was making its power and authority known. "We are in charge here!" was the message of the annual Passover parade of the occupying forces. After all, Passover commemorated the liberation of the Hebrew people from another century's oppressive empire--wouldn't want the peasants to get any ideas about an uprising, now would they? Dressed in armor, with helmets and banners and eagles mounted on poles, there was nothing funny in that parade. But on the east side, Jesus and his friends were having a great time staging a parody, an event designed to help people laugh. Consider the absurdity of it all, the incongruity of a king who had conquered nothing, riding on a colt.

Which brings us to the second element of humor in this story. It is always fun to mock those in power, right? To find the weaknesses of the authorities and exaggerate them and knock them down a peg? Jokes about George W. Bush aren't that funny these days, because he's not the president anymore. Barack Obama had better be prepared—there's always political humor directed at the one with the most power. We enjoy laughing at others' mistakes, and we take pleasure in feeling superior. To laugh at authorities reverses the hierarchy—it puts them down and puts us up. There is an element of this kind of humor in Jesus' street theater parade.

For this motley assortment, that is, Jesus and his friends, is mocking the Romans and their pageantry. This is political satire. Jesus is lampooning the powers of this world, the military might which seems to be in charge but which is nothing compared to the kingdom of God. The warriors of the world's greatest empire, displaying all their might, were on parade on the west side of Jerusalem. The prince of peace, the herald of God's everlasting kingdom, was on the east side. It's kind of like the demonstrations held last week in London, attempting to get the attention of the G-20 leaders. Their story didn't make the front page. But in an authoritarian regime like the Roman Empire, there is little sense of humor, and political satire is not welcome. The parade which proclaims Jesus to be the king "like David" is a threat to the "powers that be." It is political, and social, and spiritual demonstration. And it is funny because it mocks the established order.

There is a third element of humor which I see in this triumphal entry story. It's the same quality that makes me laugh at the comic strips about families. They hit home. They tell the truth. The teenager lounging on the chair who looks at his parents and thinks to himself, "How is it possible for two people to be so consistently wrong about everything?" (Not that it happens at my house—but I know people with teenagers, and I know teenagers with parents, and it happens.)

Situations are funny when they speak the truth in a fresh way, when they dare to say what has previously been unspoken. Freud called this the "relief theory" of humor, when the restraints of politeness or convention are outwitted and the truth gets out. The truth which is demonstrated in the triumphal entry story is that surprise, surprise, Jesus really is a king! He deserves all this fanfare, all this glory. It's funny that he's been masquerading as a humble peasant when in truth he is the king of glory! It's funny that he's a king who chooses a colt rather than a stallion, but he is the prince of peace, not a warrior king. It's funny that the people lay down their cloaks and branches and sing "Save us, Jesus!" because that's exactly what his mission is about, though they don't really understand. It's funny, and it's sad at the same time. Because from this vantage point in history, we know what's coming next.

We know that this little parade, this little political demonstration, will get the attention of the authorities, and not in a good way. We know that the "powers that be" will plot and scheme to get rid of this trouble-making preacher, whose greatest crime is to speak the truth. We know that the people who have benefitted most from Jesus' words and deeds, those who have found hope and healing in his presence with them, will be helpless before the week is out, and all but a few will leave his side. We know that the political authorities and the religious leaders will see their mutual advantage in silencing Jesus,

and they will carry out a sham trial and make him their scapegoat and brutally execute him on a cross, within 5 days. We know that this joyful, laughing parade is a last hurrah before the party will be over on Friday.

One humorist says that humor is “tragedy separated by time and space.” (Charles Jarvis) The line between comedy and tragedy can be very thin. This week, we see that truth.

So, seeing that truth, what can we do about it? We can’t turn back the pages of history and tell the people of first century Palestine to live that week over again with a different outcome. We can’t warn Jesus and his friends that the parade was too much, that the demonstration in the Temple the next day was too much, that he shouldn’t have gone to Jerusalem that week, that he could have stayed in Bethany with Lazarus and Martha and Mary and waited until the political tensions were lower. We’re too late for all that. And it probably wouldn’t have worked, anyway. Jesus had a plan.

But what we can do is to stay with him all the way, all week long, even to the cross. What we can do is love him even when we don’t fully understand him, even when his path makes our lives uncomfortable, and even when his way means challenging the “powers that be” in our world. And even when challenging the “powers that be” means changing who or what we worship, who or what we let “lord it over” our lives.

This is a day, and a week, when we decide again whether Jesus is Lord and Savior for us or not. If he is Lord, then his way of love and peace is the way we commit ourselves to live. If he is Savior, then we have nothing to fear, in this world or the next. This is a week to walk with Christ, to learn nonviolence, to be people of peace even when that means sure suffering. This is a week to begin the journey of the rest of your life on the way that heals the brokenhearted, binds up the wounds of those who suffer, and sets free those who are oppressed. This is a week to join the company of his disciples, those laughing fools who shout “Save us, Jesus!” and pledge to be part of God’s continuing story of salvation and hope.

And humor. For God is going to have the last laugh. It will be a hard week for Jesus, but next Sunday, I promise you, we’ll all be laughing in the face of evil and death. What could be more incongruous than a dead man walking? What worldly authorities could be more fun to mock than death and sin? And won’t it be a relief to hear and see the truth that God is the final victor, that God is really in charge of this world?!

My friends, God in Christ is willing to make the final sacrifice in order to make us laugh again. Thank you, Jesus! Amen.