

The Lord Needs It

The Rev. Geoff Parker to First Parish Church - Brunswick, ME

Sunday, March 6, 2016

Scripture: [Luke 19:28–40](#)

Introduction to the Scripture

As we've reminded ourselves yet again this year, the story of Holy Week starts with a parade. It had very little resemblance to Saint Patrick's Day parades these days. But even in his own time, Jesus's last crescendo begins with an inversion of the world as it was. A number of years ago, as a congregation, we read John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg's extended exegesis on the Holy Week Story called the *Last Week*. Crossan and Borg begin their telling of the Holy Week scriptures by reminding readers of the historical context of the time, which is to say: Rome. The empire that defined what so many thought of as "the known world". For Rome, parades were a political military tool. Equal parts distracting entertainment and intimidating displays of force. As Mary told the kids... the other parade in town was led by Pontius Pilate riding a warhorse.

Jesus now stands ready to begin his own parade. And it will have a very different meaning. But first, he will need some hardware... Listen for the Spirit moving in this story, waiting to march.

Sermon

One of the things that marks a dramatic shift in the storytelling for Holy Week is this bit about what Jesus needs to tell the story in his way. Suddenly, for a guy that has been really paying attention to the needs of other people... well, it kind of becomes about him. And not at all in a bad way I don't think. The Holy Week story introduces a new phrase into Jesus's ministry: "The Lord needs it."

In the days to come, Jesus will need a lot of things. He will need an upper room, bread, and wine. He will need water for washing feet. He will need disciples who can stay awake in dark night of loneliness and betrayal. He will need witnesses. It is remarkable turn in the ministry of his life, that Holy Week will require so much from him, and from others.

Particularly, the Lord needs a colt today. For whatever reason, in re-reading this scripture, the deadpan delivery of the disciples, and the fact that this poor horse-owner doesn't get to have reply on the record just kind of made me giggle. The opening bit of the great work of Holy Week? The disciples become dirty, no good horse thieves, essentially. If you want to try this out, try getting in someone else's car on the way home today. If they give you a strange look, just say, "The Lord needs it." I'm sure it will all work out.

As we heard in our Palm Sunday Litany, Jesus has asked for this special equipment for this parade, because he knows his people, and he knows his scripture. It is a fulfillment of scriptural prophecy that the messiah will enter Jerusalem riding on a colt. The gospel of Matthew in telling this story is so concerned with completing the ancient writings that to cover any issues with translation, it makes sure that Jesus rides in on both a colt *and* a donkey. Which is when you picture Jesus kind of water-skiing between two different animals, and the whole “critiquing authority with irony” thing kind of jumps the shark. More on why it matters that the messiah would ride a colt later.

The Lord needs it.

Indeed, it takes a whole city to tell the story of Holy Week. It takes all of Jerusalem, with all of its intrigue and politics. It takes disciples who want to do good, but almost never manage to. It takes a system of religious and imperial patronage. The Lord will need it all. So, for us, now, in this time, this year, this Holy Week?

What does the Lord need from us to tell the story of new life?

What are the gifts we have to share? This is a church-y question if ever there was one... We are a community that thrives in the space in which our gifts are joined as one. We are a very busy, very active, very talented congregation... I think we are learning to ask each other where our passions and our gifts are, and how we might all as a community be enriched by those gifts.

Why does the Lord need it?

Here’s an important question... why does the messiah need to be on a colt, and not stallion? I think because the prophecies and Jesus want to upend what we think of kingship.

It is a powerful question for us to ask as so much of our political discourse becomes mired in the language of strength. Strength, it appears, is now a new philosophy of leadership in and of itself. We don’t need diplomacy, we need strength.... we don’t need nuance, we need strength. This Holy Week story asks over and over again for gifts that underline something different.

Pay attention to what the Lord needs. Because it isn’t your mightiest moment, your most powerful gift.

Because Jesus takes pains to fulfill the scriptural inversion of a king that doesn’t ride a war horse, but a colt... Or a donkey. So when we imagine the disciples appearing to us today, we shouldn’t be surprised that the question, the need they bring from Jesus is not for our shiniest gift that makes us look most competent, most wise, most powerful. No, the disciples want a colt, not a war horse... And so the gift that is asked of us is... What gift of your vulnerability do you have to share for the telling of this story?

The Holy Week story to come is a story that completely hinges on vulnerability.

I recently read *When Breath Becomes Air* by Dr. Paul Kalanithi ^[1], a neurosurgeon friend of my sister’s who wrote it as a sort of memoir as he progressed through stage IV lung cancer. In the end, his widow, Dr. Lucy Kalanithi completed it. As a memoir of a person making meaning of his life under the

incredible stress of life-defining, and life-ending change...using art, literature, science, and philosophy, I recommend it. If you have recently lost someone, especially to cancer, I emphatically DON'T recommend it. It is a wonderful book that will be there in a later season.

What struck me most in reviewing it in the past few weeks, was the stress and unmooring experience of an extraordinarily gifted and accomplished man sharing the pain of revised and reimagined purpose, given a life that was not going to plan...including the very intentional choice that both Paul and Lucy made to include the detail of the strain that their marriage was under immediately before Paul's diagnosis. They were both in high-powered medical residencies. Their careers and their paths seemed locked... Until cancer changed that.

This is not because cancer is a hero in this story. It is the villain as surely as the death that waits for Jesus is in his story. The hero is the vulnerability that they expose to each other in the times that follow, and indeed to us all through the sharing of Paul's life, illness, and death. That openness transformed their lives in the meaning and in the living.

So it will be for the one who comes in the name of the Lord, but seated on a colt, on a donkey. This Holy Week Story, it's not about a miraculous death. It is about a miraculous *life* of Jesus made so meaningful—so powerful—by the vulnerability and acceptance of the love of God, that it just straight up could not die.

So, when you think about what might be being called out of you... consider the ponies of your life, not the war horses. Consider that the gifts to our communal life together may be in the nagging question or doubt or even fear you have. Consider that the gift we most need is the skill that you have never had the nerve to explore.

Can we share our broken hearts here? Can we share the flame just sputtering to life in us?

Those are the gifts we need. The Lord needs it. To tell this story, a story of death and loss but of new life. Amen.

1. [When Breath Becomes Air](#) p. 216 ↩