

**AT THE CENTER**  
**Sermon, April 17, 2011**  
**Palm/Passion Sunday**

Today is Palm Sunday; today is also called Passion Sunday. It is the first day of Holy Week. What a spectrum of emotions takes place in Holy Week. We will go from "Hallelujah" on Sunday to "Crucify him" on Friday, from "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord," to the scoffing "He saved others; let him save himself!" We will go from triumphal entry, with the waving of palms and the welcoming shouts and delightful cries of children, to hoots of derision and cries for Jesus' crucifixion and death. Many who attend church go from the "Hosannas" of Palm Sunday directly to the "Hallelujahs" of Easter, and completely miss marking what takes place in between ... the events that are at the center of the Christian gospel, the events of Jesus' passion. That, by the way, is a plug for you to attend/participate in the services of worship being planned this week on Maundy Thursday (*an excellent cantata is in the works from our choir!*) and Good Friday!

Why "passion;" why is that word used? We normally associate the word with intense emotion and feeling, an intensity which can be positive or negative. Our English word passion comes from the Greek word "pascho" (πασχω), which strictly means to suffer, endure, to undergo or experience difficulty. This word is used in Acts 1:3 to refer to the events of this week leading up to and including Jesus' death on Friday afternoon. But it is appropriate to use "passion" in the English sense as well, because God's passion is on display in the Passion! God's passionate love for His people is at work. Jesus' suffering ... His Passion ... was born of *divine* passion. It was born out of God's passionate love for you and for me.

Holy week begins with passionate crowds. Jesus had just left the village of Bethany and was coming down the Mount of Olives, by the Garden of Gethsemane, on the way to the Golden Gate which was the gate through which the Messiah was expected to enter Jerusalem. (*Some of you know this bit of history, but Ottoman Sultan Suleiman I sealed off Jerusalem's Golden Gate in 1541 to prevent the Messiah's entrance; he wanted to crush any hope the conquered Jews of his time might muster. It remains sealed to this day. However, Suleiman was about a millennium and a half too late!*) The triumphal procession was accompanied by shouting and singing from the crowds of people lining the roadside, people who had been gathering from the outlying villages for a glimpse of this rabbi from Galilee, this miracle-worker who had reportedly raised a man from the dead (*which we talked about last week*), this man rumored to be the Messiah. This was a politically charged event. The palm branch was something of a nationalistic symbol of the time, almost like a Jewish flag, and these people waving these branches are doing so in full view of the Roman occupiers. No doubt about it, Jesus deliberately chose to make a statement with this baldly public entry into Jerusalem. It was the end of all privacy, anonymity and safety, and the beginning of what would be an inevitable collision course with the priestly and political authorities. This step was taken deliberately, with every consideration for the consequences; after all, He could have quietly slipped into the city along with the thousands of Passover pilgrims. But He didn't.

On the lips of the passionate crowd as Jesus rode into the city on that donkey were the words, "*Hosannah! Blessed is He Who Comes in the Name of the Lord!*" This is a quote from Psalm 118:25. Psalm 118 was part of the Passover liturgy; it was the last of a series of Psalms sung by pilgrims as they ascended the Holy City on their way to the Passover celebration; these words would also be sung during the Passover meal itself (*in fact, Psalm 118 was most likely the hymn sung by the disciples following the Last Supper*). "*Hosannah! Blessed is He Who Comes in the Name of the Lord!*" A little trivia quiz: Do you know which chapter is in the very center of the Bible? Some of you may know the answer (*I mentioned this on Palm Sunday ten years ago, so I'm SURE many of you remember ... uh, right?*). The center chapter of the Bible is Psalm 118. There are exactly 594 chapters in the Bible before Psalm 118, and there are exactly 594 chapters in the Bible after Psalm 118. Now ... if you add 594 and 594, what do you get? 1188. Bear with me, now. Do you know what the center verse in the *Bible* is? Psalm 118:8. What does that central verse of the Scripture say? Psalms 118:8 -- "*It is better to take refuge in the Lord (or, as some translations have it, to trust in the Lord) than to put confidence in man.*" So, if you want a central focus for your life, start with this central verse of the Bible, which is both literally and figuratively THE central verse of Scripture! This is the central detail to get straight. "**PUT YOUR TRUST IN THE LORD.**" Put your trust in this Lord Who is passionate about you and your well being and the well being of all who you love. This Psalm at the center of the Scriptures is the Psalm on the lips of those who hailed the One who was the center of this processional parade. Jesus is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. He is the central figure prophesied in this central Psalm; in fact, He is the central figure of this entire Book we call the Bible, this 66 book, millennia-long drama of redemption.

Note who *else* is at the center in this parade. I'll give a hint: Who was at the center of our little parade this morning? The donkey. (*Our donkey's name was Doodles, not to be confused with Domenick ... that's the Italian Christmas donkey*). The donkey is at the center of the original Palm Sunday parade as well, or at least he's playing a central supporting role! Why the donkey? Why did Jesus choose this steed? A few reasons: First, every faithful Jew of Jesus' day

knew Zechariah's prophecy referred to in our Responsive Reading. Zechariah foresaw Israel's Messiah, Israel's king, coming to Jerusalem, "... meek and riding on a donkey, riding upon the foal of a donkey" ... and here comes Jesus, riding on this foal of a donkey, right on up to the Golden Gate. By deliberately choosing to ride this foal of a donkey through this particular gate, Jesus presented Himself to the people of Israel as the fulfillment of this prophecy. Another reason: It was an ancient tradition that when a king came riding in upon a donkey, it was a sign he came in peace. The *horse* was the mount of war; the *donkey* was the mount of peace. The horse puts the rider high and above the heads of others, the donkey doesn't. In fact, sitting on the short-legged beasts puts the rider pretty much at eye level with a standing crowd. This was the original Low Rider. Mounted on a lowly donkey, Jesus couldn't impressively ride through a crowd ... He could only ride in the midst of the crowd, eye level, being as much a part of the crush as were all the others. This King of Kings is also the Prince of Peace. He rode upon a donkey; He was not coming to do battle with the Romans.

Another reason Jesus chose this particular steed is one easily overlooked amid the Hosannahs and hubbub. This colt upon which Jesus rode *had never been ridden before*. I've pointed this out in Palm Sundays past, but it's worth pointing out again ... this is profound! In the midst of this excited, loud, exuberant crowd, this *unbroken* animal remains calm and compliant and cooperative with a passenger on his back. And this is not just any animal; this is a *donkey!* An animal renowned for its stubbornness and non-compliance; even broken donkeys can be stubbornly belligerent on occasion ... even with gentle Doodles this morning we were warned by the owners to keep children out of "kick" range as a precaution. But apparently, this unbroken, untamed animal carrying Jesus recognized his Creator, the Ruler of all nature, and allowed himself to be "broken" by him, to be *tamed* by Him, to be *used* by Him. The donkey willingly and immediately subjected himself in humble obedience to his Lord, and obediently carried His Lord into his world. By His deliberate choice of this particular steed, I think Jesus is saying without words, "*Now look, everyone. If a simple jack ... donkey can understand who I am and behave accordingly, well, how about you?*" So, at the center of this drama is a creature that has long been depicted as the perennial symbol of stubborn foolishness. Everyone from Shakespeare to Pinocchio knows that fools and dolts are depicted as donkeys. Something of God's humor is on display here, for *this* particular donkey is on center stage depicting the epitome of wisdom, not foolishness. "*For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom ...*"

One of the classic images of the Old West is that of the gnarled, grubby gold prospector trudging through creek-beds, canyons, and mountain passes with his trusty, heavy-laden donkey by his side. Miners didn't use horses because they were not sure footed enough to traverse the rough terrain, the narrow, winding trails, the steep valleys, the slippery creek-side stones. No, carrying the prospector and his treasure was a duty only trusted to donkeys. Today tourists can relive some of the experience of donkey travel when they sign up to take the long trail ride down into the base of the Grand Canyon on the back of one of these beasts. I'm told these rides are so popular you have to reserve them nine months to a year in advance, you can't weigh more than 200 pounds (*that counts me out*), you must speak English, no pregnant women allowed, and if you are afraid of heights, forget it! The Grand Canyon mules/donkeys often terrify their passengers by walking as close to the edges as possible. They traipse down the canyon right along the very edges of the precipices with their teetering passengers terrified on their backs. For some unknown reason these beasts feel safest and most secure when they can clearly see exactly where the edge is, so they go right up to it. These aren't middle of the road creatures (*they'd make lousy politicians*); they like to journey the exhilarating edges of the heights, and are comfortable doing so. (*For those of you who know the song Domenick the Donkey, "... when Santa visits his pacons, with Domenick he'll be, because the reindeer cannot climb the hills of Italy! la, la, la..."*)

This was Jesus' steed of choice. And donkeys are still Jesus' steed of choice. If the mission of the church is to carry Christ into the world, then each of us has a high calling to be a lowly donkey. Donkeys are known for strong backs that carry a lot of burdens, and faithful feet that often carry loads along pathways others find too difficult or too treacherous or too frightening. Of course, donkeys are also known to be stubborn and obstinate. That's OK. From the days of the Hebrews in the wilderness, God's people have often been identified as stubborn and stiff-necked. A donkey can be a stubborn steed with a mind of its own, but it will work hard and long and tirelessly. That's an apt description of many a faithful church worker! God delights in people who have minds of their own and who choose to love Him with all of their minds, and who work hard and long and tirelessly for His greater purposes. There may be no particular glory in being a donkey ... there are long trails, steep roads, heavy loads ... but look at what treasure we have the privilege of carrying: the King of Kings, the Prince of Peace, the Lamb of God Who has come to take away the sins of the world.

Let's learn a lesson from this central supporting character of the parade, and carry Christ wherever He wants to go! And let us walk as those who are comfortable journeying the sometimes frightening but exhilarating edges and high places between this world and the next, getting out of the middle of the road! And may we allow the Jesus full "rein" in our lives, may we allow Him to bridle our passions, and may we willingly submit to the gentle, guiding control of the King of Kings, that we might be used by Him for His greater purposes.