

THE ODDEST DAY OF THE YEAR

It is the oddest day of the year if you are a Christian. Even if you are not, it seems quite strange. We begin this day with the hopeful account of Jesus entering Jerusalem. Though he rides a donkey, the crowd doesn't care, at least not yet. They welcome him as king. The entry is a great prelude. The feeling of triumph is palpable. Great things lie ahead. But not what the crowd imagines.

In an instant the warm feeling is gone. The crowd that welcomed Jesus as king calls for his execution. Adored in one moment, condemned to death in the next. Even Pontius Pilate is astounded. But he bends to the crowd.

Crowds are fickle; their sentiments change suddenly. But crowds can grow rapidly. We join because of our fears and angers, more than our hopes. We feel cheated somehow. Then we are swept along. We praise Jesus for a moment, then abandon him when he departs from the script. He can do no wrong, until he can do nothing right. How can we shift so completely? The answer is painfully obvious.

We want a king who will rescue us, not one riding on a donkey. A king who will fulfill our expectations, confirm our prejudices, secure our control. When he is arrested, without resistance, we feel betrayed. There is no great army to the rescue; the cavalry does not come. We should have known. He rode a donkey; he wasn't a great general or political firebrand. An odd man on what has become an odd day. Who could possibly follow him?

We reject leaders who prove so vulnerable. We want toughness, power, control. The crowd rejects a vulnerable Jesus, a Jesus who rides on a donkey. We are part of that crowd, thinking he is defeated, and so are we. If only we saw that the donkey is symbolic, and being vulnerable is key. You cannot avoid your vulnerability, you cannot run from who you are, as author Brene Brown says. Love and hope cannot be born when we are part of the crowd. There we are trapped by hurts and illusions. The crowd hides from its reality. The crowd wants to kill Jesus.

They have misunderstood Jesus. And misunderstood what it means to be alive. Perhaps they thought his entry into Jerusalem was a gimmick. But Jesus is a different sort of king, and the crowd doesn't get it. He builds a kingdom of a different sort, one they cannot see. Fickle, controlling, temperamental, self-important people never get it. Instead they get angry because things don't go their way. Jesus brings no easy answers, no vindication. Instead he brings a way of life.

We must be real, as Jesus was real. We must stop the pretending; we don't need to pretend we are tough, pretend we are in control. We need to be who we are, vulnerability and all. Then the man on the donkey makes sense. His vulnerability is our doorway. Not to imaginary victories and glory; but to truth, to trust, to care for others and for ourselves. That's where he is leading; that's what the donkey means. That's the kingdom he announces.

Ironically, as he dies, his kingdom is born. Because he dies, we can live.
Riding a donkey, he shows us the way.

The temper of the crowd is always fickle, Machiavelli said. So we must break from the crowd. We must be our own best selves. So we follow the man on the donkey, on the oddest day of the year. Now we know that this is not the end, it is the beginning. You can awaken, to God, to others, to yourself. May God bless you on your awakening and your journey.

Amen.

William L. Sachs

Sermon for Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, VA