

STRAIGHT OUT OF CENTRAL CASTING

Sermon, March 20, 2015

Passion/Palm Sunday

Today is Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday, this is the first day of Holy Week. What a spectrum of emotions takes place in the course of this week. We will go from "Hallelujah! Hosannah!" on Sunday to "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" on Friday. We will go from the exuberant "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord," to the scoffing and jeering "He saved others; let Him save Himself!" We will go from Jesus' triumphal entry, with the waving of palms and the welcoming shouts of the crowd and the delightful cries of children, to hoots of derision and loud demands for Jesus' crucifixion and death. Please don't go from the "Hosannas" of Palm Sunday directly to the "Hallelujahs" of Easter, and completely miss marking and commemorating and contemplating 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 the services of worship being planned this week on Maundy Thursday 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 a Greek root word which specifically means to suffer, to undergo or experience difficulty. But it is appropriate to use "passion" in the broader 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.

And 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, a distance roughly approximate to the distance between here and the community college (*ed. note, not mentioned in the sermon I know that path well; in fact, Hannah and I drove a rental car down a really windy, narrow road paralleling that path from the Mount of Olives and nearly got lost! Also, like CCRI, Jerusalem is an uphill climb, only much higher ... it sits high on a huge hill. Some of you know this bit of history, but in 1541 the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman I sealed off Jerusalem's Golden Gate to prevent the Messiah's entrance; he wanted to crush any expectation or 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!*) This triumphal procession was accompanied by shouting and singing from the crowds of people lining the roadside along the way, 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, this man rumored to be the Messiah. Perhaps in that crowd was the former blind man, the one who had his sight restored. Perhaps in the crowd was the woman caught in adultery, the one who had her dignity restored. Perhaps in the crowd was Zaccheus, the former little cheat from Jericho, the one who had his integrity restored. Perhaps in the crowd was Lazarus, the one who had his very *life* restored ... all by the grace of Jesus Christ, the central figure in this parade. The crowd certainly included hungry people Jesus had fed, sick people Jesus had healed, despairing people to whom Jesus had given hope.

On the lips of the passionate crowd as Jesus rode up into the city on that donkey were the words, "Hosannah! Blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the LORD!" This is actually 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. A little trivia quiz: Do you remember which chapter is in the very center of the Bible? (*I mentioned this on Palm Sunday 5 years ago & 15 years ago, so I'm SURE all of you remember, 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 a moment; I know numbers can be hard to follow in a public speaking context.*) Do you know the *central* verse in the entire Bible? Psalm 118:8. What does that central verse of the Scripture say? Psalm 118:8 -- "It is better 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* mandate 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 whom you love. So, 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, Who also happens to be THE central figure of the entire Bible!

I'm sure you've heard the expression, "Straight out of Central Casting." If someone fits something of a stereotypical figure, that person is jokingly referred to as someone "straight out of central casting." Central Casting is an actual company that celebrated its 90th anniversary last December. Central Casting was established in 1925 in Burbank as a wing of the Association of Motion Picture Producers. The company focused solely on casting extras for the motion picture industry, primarily background actors. These extras help create the scene and set the stage and help support the central actors, the "name" actors, of the cinematic productions. By 1929, four years

after its founding, Central Casting had over 17,500 extras on its books; I understand it is now upwards of 70,000. Last January the Wall Street Journal ran an article about the company Central Casting,¹ highlighting some megastars who rose to fame after making their debuts in bit parts. Central Casting helped launch the careers of Brad Pitt, Eva Longoria, John Wayne, Ava Gardner, Kelly Clarkson, and Ronald Reagan, all bit characters who went on to make it big ... in fact, Ava Gardner's motion picture debut lasted all of two seconds! Again, the name of this company has developed into a jargon term denoting a stereotypical character ... a person who happens to strongly match a particular stereotype is said to be "straight out of Central Casting."

Well, Palm Sunday has a supporting character straight out of Central Casting, a *perfect* stereotype of the faithful Christian. This character is playing a HUGE (*and literal!*) supporting role to the central character of the Palm Sunday drama. I'll give a hint: Who was at the center of our little parade this morning? Hannah the Donkey. In the original Palm Sunday "production," the donkey is literally playing a central supporting role, and is an ideal stereotype of the faithful Christian! Why is this beast an ideal stereotype? I'm glad you asked. Before I answer, I want to preface it by giving two other reasons why Jesus chose this particular supporting character to play such a crucial role. (*I've pointed these out in Palm Sundays past ... if you remember, I'm flattered, if not, well, the review will do you good!*)

Why did Jesus choose this particular mode of transportation? 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 of the Holy City. By deliberately choosing to ride this foal of a donkey through this particular gate, Jesus unabashedly and boldly presented Himself to the people of Israel as the fulfillment of this very well-known prophecy. The second reason: It was an ancient tradition that when an arriving king rode 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 does not. In fact, sitting on the short-legged beasts puts the rider pretty much at eye level with a standing crowd. Mounted on the original "Low Rider," Jesus rode in the midst of the crowd, at eye level, being as much a part of the crush as all the others crowding that city during Passover. This King of Kings is also the Prince of Peace. He rode upon a donkey; He was not coming to do battle with the occupying Romans as the more zealous hoped.

But I believe the best reason Jesus chose this particular steed is one easily overlooked amid the Hosannahs and the hubbub. This foal upon which Jesus rode *had never been ridden before*. 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 dig-in-the-heels stubbornness and non-compliance. But I think this particular unbroken, untamed animal carrying Jesus instinctively *recognized* its 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 itself in humble obedience to its Lord to be used for whatever purpose its Creator desired, and it obediently carried his Lord into his world. I think the unspoken message of Jesus exemplified by His deliberate choice of this particular steed is, "*Now look, everyone. If a simple jack ... DONKEY can understand Who I am and respond accordingly, well, how about you?*" THIS it is what makes the donkey such a character straight out of Central Casting, a stereotype of the faithful Christian. I don't mind that my daughter has the same name as the donkey in our little processional reenactment today! I WANT my children to imitate this character straight out of Central Casting; I want ALL of us to imitate this donkey, by allowing Jesus Christ to have full "rein" (*and reign!*) in our lives, playing supporting roles in any way possible to bring attention to THE central character of the drama of salvation, and being willing to be used to carry Him into the places we live and work.

The mission of the church is to carry Christ into the world; each of us has a high calling to be a lowly donkey. It may not seem a glamorous or glorious role, but we support the One Who is ultimately glamorous, glorious! Of course, donkeys are known to be stubborn and obstinate. From the days of the Old Testament onward, God's people have often been identified as stubborn and stiff-necked and obstinate. A donkey can be a stubborn steed with a mind of its own, but it will work hard and long and tirelessly when willing! That's an apt description of many a faithful Christian! God delights in people who have minds of their own and who choose to love Him with all of their mind, soul, heart and strength, working hard and long and tirelessly for His greater purposes. Let's learn a lesson from this central supporting character, let us carry Christ wherever He wants us to take Him! And may we allow the "Star of the show" full "rein" in our lives, may we allow Him to bridle our passions, and may we willingly submit to His gentle, guiding control as we play key supporting roles for the central Star of our redemption.

¹ See <http://www.wsj.com/articles/hollywoods-bit-players-need-to-stand-out-before-they-can-blend-in-1422402004> and <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2015/01/28/5-megastars-who-got-their-start-as-extras/>