

# Closing Costs

## Sermon, April 9, 2017

### Palm/Passion Sunday

The husband and wife were having a ... discussion ... while in the car. Actually, it was an intense argument; emotions were running high, each digging in their heels to preserve the position they had vehemently taken. Harsh words had been said, old wounds had been re-opened, and now both were nursing hurt feelings in defensive silence. And ironically, they were on their way to attend a wedding, both of them staring alternatively straight ahead or out the window (but not at each other) as the miles went by in icy silence. The tension between them was so thick it could be cut with a knife. But then the silence was broken. Pointing to a donkey standing in a pasture beside the road, the husband asked sarcastically, "*Relative of yours?*"

Without missing a beat, the wife replied, "*Yes. By marriage.*"

By the way, the story did have a happy ending; after that witty comeback he couldn't stay angry and neither could she ... it broke the tension and they were able to practice what so many imperfect, but loving couples discover again and again ... the redeeming, love-enhancing ability to laugh at our foibles.

Well, at the center of the Palm Sunday drama is one of this woman's in-laws, the perennial symbol of stubbornness. The hapless donkey has long been depicted as contrary, unintelligent, an object of ridicule. Fools and thick-headed dolts are often depicted in conversation and culture and literature as donkeys. But *this* particular donkey is the epitome of wisdom, not foolishness. Why? I'm glad you asked. Why did Jesus choose this particular mode of transportation? There are basically three reasons, reasons I've pointed out in Palm Sundays past, but the review won't hurt.

**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 "... *meeek 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, and through this particular gate, Jesus unabashedly presented Himself to the people of Israel as the fulfillment of this very well-known prophecy.

**Second**, it was an ancient tradition that when an arriving monarch rode 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 does not. In fact, sitting on the short-legged beasts puts the rider pretty much at eye level with a standing crowd; it's the original Low Rider. This King of Kings is also the Prince of Peace. Mounted on a donkey, 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 the Passover festival.

**Third**, and probably the best, reason Jesus chose this particular steed is one easily overlooked amid the Hosannahs and the hubbub. This colt 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; even broken donkeys can be stubbornly belligerent on occasion. But I think this particular 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 and obediently subjected himself to his Maker. By choosing this particular steed, I think Jesus is saying without words, "*Now look, everyone! If a simple donkey can understand Who I am and behave accordingly, well, how about you?*" All of us need to see this donkey as our role model, and let Jesus Christ have full "rein" (*and reign*) in our lives, let Him bridle our passions, let's be used by Jesus to bring Jesus into our worlds, wherever we live, work, volunteer, study and/or play.

Today we have ten new members uniting with our congregation; in every new members' class, I go over some of the classic distinctives of Protestantism, one of them being the biblical teaching of the "priesthood of believers" ... that all of us are called to the priesthood, to the ministry, in service of the one High Priest Jesus Christ. Theologically, there really is no "lay-clergy" distinction, all of us are called to the ministry to serve in the "parish" where God has placed us ... at home, at the office, in the school, wherever. When we gather in worship, we gather in part as ministers in training, so we can go back out better equipped to where we are called to serve Jesus Christ and minister in His name in our worlds. Yes, we do have lay-clergy distinctions in the visible church for purposes of

order; but theologically, we are all ministers, priests (*as one wag put it, I may be paid to do this; I may be paid to be good, but you are all good for nothing!*). All of us are called to the priesthood. AND all of us are called to the donkey-hood ... we are called to carry the Lord Jesus Christ wherever we go and to willingly submit to His gentle rein/reign.

I like the story of a little girl who came home from her first Palm Sunday service and her non-church going father asked how it was. She enthusiastically told him she learned all about the crowd waving their palm branches and singing a song to Jesus. The father asked, "What were they singing to Jesus?" The little girl paused, then said, "I think it was 'O Susanna.'" That would be "O Hosannah," ... literally, the word translates as "Save us now!" and was often used as a cry of triumph and salute to a reigning monarch or hero. Today is also known as 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 "Hosannahs" of the crowd, to the hoots of derision and loud demands for Jesus' crucifixion and death. To all of you here this morning, please don't go from the "Hosannas" of today directly to the "Hallelujahs" of next Sunday without commemorating and contemplating what takes place in between ... the traumatic events that are at the center of the Christian gospel, the events of Jesus' passion (*that, by the way, is a plug to attend the services of worship being planned for tonight and Maundy Thursday and Good Friday!*). Do you know what Maundy Thursday commemorates? Do you know what Good Friday is all about? What does it all mean? Don't get me wrong; I don't ask that in an accusatory fashion; I just don't want any to miss out on the wonder of it all, the wonder of what the passion of Jesus was all about. Do you even know why we use the word Passion? We normally associate the word with intense emotion, an intensity which can be positive or negative. Our English word "passion" comes from a Greek root 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 for His people 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.

One last favorite story, from the year 2011, about a woman who apparently missed the meaning of the events of this week. In that year, six years ago, April 1 fell on Good Friday. On March 31, this woman was at her local bank in New York, and raising quite a commotion at the counter. She said to the teller, "Oh, it must be an April Fool's joke. It has to be!" She was obviously distressed and agitated, and as heads started turning she loudly exclaimed, "Why wasn't I warned or notified? I have been coming here for years, and I have all my savings and my accounts and my loans here! This can't be; this has to be some sort of joke!" It turned out to the amusement of the teller and to the woman's chagrin that she had misunderstood a small sign on the counter. The sign read, WE WILL BE CLOSED FOR GOOD FRIDAY. Apparently not being familiar with the events of Holy Week, she had read the sign, "WE WILL BE CLOSED FOR GOOD ... FRIDAY." She thought that the bank was going to be closed "for good" the next day! True story!

"CLOSED FOR GOOD ... FRIDAY." I like that. Because in a way, Jesus was coming to town to "close the bank" for good on Friday. He was coming to do what it takes to close the "deal," to cover all our debts, and to pay all the closing costs (*which is about 10% extra added to the typical debt in Rhode Island*), to boot! . The Gospel can be summarized thus: Imagine there is a heavenly Bank of Righteousness, and each of us by virtue of our creation has an account (*call it a "savings" account if you want*). Each time we sin, we withdraw from our account, and we go a bit more into spiritual debt. Each and every unmet obligation, each and every violation of promise, each and every neglect of duty, each and every dishonest word and/or injurious action ... all such things are liabilities. All such things put another check in the "debit" column of our Bank of Righteousness account. The Bible tells us what we already instinctively know, that all of us ... *all* of us ... have way overdrawn our accounts and overextended whatever credit we were able to muster. We've made far too many withdrawals and far too few deposits in the Bank of Righteousness, and as a result we are spiritually bankrupt. Jesus Christ, however, has unlimited capital. He has incurred no debt of His own; and He who has no debt has come to Jerusalem riding on a donkey to pay our debt at great cost to Himself. When we pray, "Forgive us our debts," God draws on Jesus' account! That's the Gospel.

He rode upon a donkey; the steed of peace. He was not coming to do battle with the Romans. But the Messiah was coming to town to fight, and He would go on to win a decisive victory. The crowd did not understand the battle to be fought was not against the Romans. Jesus was coming to Jerusalem to fight the battle for our souls. On the back of a donkey He was storming the gates of Hell, and He was going to prevail. He was coming to conquer sin and death and to *pay our debt with finality*. So that for the believer, Hell will be closed for good, Friday ... and Heaven will be opened on Easter!

Hosannah! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!