

It was finally time to face facts. I had to say good-bye to my little red PT Cruiser. And I wasn't ready for it. It's not that I had some deep emotional connection to my PT Cruiser. It's not that I loved my car. It's that I hate change. But the PT Cruiser was starting to show its share of wear and tear. Under the hood, things were starting to go wrong... and the whole car wasn't worth the cost of potential repairs. So it was time. It was time to say good-bye to my PT Cruiser. It was time to go car shopping.

For the record, I *hate* car shopping. I hate it almost as much as I hate change. For me, taking a test drive is a joyless chore that ranks right up there with standing in line at the DMV or undergoing routine dental cleanings. Though, church... can I just say?... what I would give right now to do something normal like renew my driver's license or go to the dentist... what I would give right now to do normal things around actual human beings. God help me, I'm actually fantasizing about going to the dentist. Coronavirus does change one's perspective, I'll grant it that.

Still... even if I could go car shopping right now... even if the CDC declared car dealerships to be the sole oasis of immunity in the midst of this global pandemic... I'm still not sure I'd go for a test drive. I *really* hate car shopping. But car shopping I went, because this mom/pastor is always on the go, and this mom/pastor needs a reliable set of wheels.

(Can I just say? There are too many choices for cars. Too many choices. And options. And upgrades. And abbreviations that don't mean anything. I wish that there was just one kind of car, one that came in three sizes and four colors and that's it. That's enough variety for me. Then I wouldn't be overwhelmed by all of these choices, and all the buttons would always be in the same place, and it wouldn't take a 10-minute search to figure out how to work the windshield wipers.)

I didn't want to go car shopping, but it turns out that being an adult is approximately 72% doing stuff you don't want to do. So I went to a car dealer, found a car I liked well enough, and took it for a test drive. The salesman asked me what I thought about how it drove. "I don't know," I said. "The engine works... so I guess that's good." (What am I even supposed to be looking for, anyway?) But I liked the car. So when we returned to the dealer's lot, and the salesman asked me to rate the car on a scale of one-to-ten, I said "seven." ("Seven" is a good number, right?) Well, apparently "seven" is a good answer, but not a *really* good answer. So he asked, "What we would have to change to make this a 'ten' for you?" I laughed. "Ummm... give me a coupon for 50% off?"

Then I realized the problem. He wanted me to fall in love with the car, and that was never going to happen. So I told him. I told him I'm just not the kind of person who falls in love with her car. I come from a family of car nuts. My earliest memory is from a classic car show. Somehow, it skipped a generation. For me, buying a car is purely a matter of function. It all comes down to three questions: *Can I afford the payment? Does it have enough room for all my kids' stuff?* and *Will it last so that I don't have come car shopping again for a really long time?* Whether I like the color or body shape is really just a bonus. Features like a back-up cam or heated seats are non-factors for me. I'm even happy to roll down the window with a crank. I'm a car salesman's nightmare.

For me, my set of wheels is just a means to get from Point A to Point B. Nothing more. But I'm beginning to think I'm in the minority there. I've found that for a lot of people, the car they drive is part of their identity. It's personal, as personal as the clothes they choose to put on in the morning. Their set of wheels is a statement.

That was certainly true for Jesus. We see that in his choice of wheels -- or rather, hooves -- in the scripture for today, for this Palm Sunday.

¹²The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—
the King of Israel!’

¹⁴Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

¹⁵‘Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey’s colt!’ (John 12:12-15, NRSV).

Jesus’ ride, his donkey, was a statement. (Actually, it wasn’t even his donkey. It was a loaner. He found it. But it was still a statement.)

You know, I have to be honest, church... as I returned to this story this week, I almost missed the statement. I almost missed the donkey. I kept getting distracted by the crowd. “The next day,” we’re told, “The great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem” (John 12:12, NRSV). *The great crowd*. Look at them there, gathered in a crowd. I bet they’re not even standing six feet apart. *The great crowd*. Remember crowds? I used to hate crowds. Now... man, I need to get back out in the world amongst people.

A great crowd has gathered in Jerusalem. They haven’t necessarily come to see Jesus; they’ve come to celebrate Passover. But now... now they’ve heard that Jesus will be there, in Jerusalem. Jesus! They’ve heard his teachings. They’ve witnessed his miracles. They can sense it in the electrified air: this man isn’t just any man, and this moment isn’t just any moment. The world is on the verge of something big, and this “Jesus of Nazareth” is right at the center of it. So they gather to welcome him into the

city. They wave palm branches in celebration, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!” (John 12:13, NRSV).

I could preach for a dozen Palm Sundays about what the crowd’s palm branches signify, or what their words mean. But today, I want to zero in on words said not by the crowds, and not even by Jesus... but rather, by the narrator. We read: “Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: ‘Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!’” (John 12:14-15, NRSV). Those words are a kind of quote, a paraphrase of one of the Old Testament prophets. We read, in the prophet Zechariah:

[Zechariah 9:9, NRSV]

⁹ Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you;

triumphant and victorious is he,

humble and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

“Humble,” the prophet tells us, “and riding on a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9, NRSV). I told you: Jesus’ choice of wheels – or rather, hooves – is a statement. And that statement is one of humility. When Jesus, the King of kings, chooses to make his grand and triumphant entrance on the streets of Jerusalem, he doesn’t stride in on a war horse. He ambles in on a donkey.

We call this story, this moment, the “triumphal entry.” We remember it as the moment when Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph... but as Christian people, we also remember it in light of the cross, so we understand that “triumph” in a metaphorical, triumph-over-the-powers-of-sin-and-death kind of way. Yet for many of the people in the crowd, this “triumph” of the triumphal entry is a literal one. A military one. They believe that this, now, is the moment when God will overthrow the Romans, and usher

in an era of peace. They believe that Jesus will be the one to accomplish this. Even some of the disciples believe that.

We see the story differently. And sometimes, with the benefit of two thousand years' worth of hindsight, we tend to look at these crowds and get a little condescending. We shake our heads and say, "Oh, they just didn't get it." But I think we can hardly blame them. Many of them are barely surviving Rome's imperial grip. They long to see the end of Rome's brutal power. They long for the kind of lasting peace that the scriptures foretell. They're not wrong to expect that.

But Jesus doesn't come in that kind of triumph. Jesus' vehicle of choice tells us that much. Jesus' donkey helps us understand what Palm Sunday means. This moment, this Palm Sunday moment, is not about the triumph of worldly power. It is about the triumph of humility.

As I say that, I'm mindful of the fact that humility, as a value and a virtue, can be quite misunderstood. The little thesaurus app on my phone (yes, I have a thesaurus app on my phone, I am quite a nerd) puts the word "humility" in the same category as "sheepishness" or "inferiority complex." Seriously?!? I don't know, I think that says something more about the nature of our culture than it does about the nature of humility. My Jesus, donkey or no, isn't sheepish, and he certainly doesn't suffer from any kind of inferiority complex, since he's... you know... God. If Jesus is humble, then "humility" must mean something else altogether.

C.S. Lewis, an influential Christian writer of the 20th century, writes about humility... and his perspective on humility might be helpful for us today, on this Palm Sunday. His perspective on humility has nothing to do with an inferiority complex. He writes: "Humility is not thinking less of yourself. It is thinking of yourself less." Hear that again: *Humility is not thinking less of yourself. It is thinking of yourself less.*

What does that look like? What does “thinking of yourself less” look like? What does that look like in this culture that so often encourages us to think of ourselves more, ourselves most, ourselves first? Even more to the point, what does that look like in this culture marked by coronavirus? What does it look like to “think of yourself less”?

In a time when too many grocery stores shelves are empty because too many of us have moved past “stocking up” and well into “hoarding”... perhaps “thinking of yourself less” looks like buying what you need for right now, and not what you’ll need for the next six months. In a time when too many of us are being exposed to coronavirus because too few of us are taking “stay at home” orders seriously... perhaps “thinking of yourself less” looks like going out only when you really need to, and not when you just want to. In a time when too many people have lost their jobs, their income, and their savings... perhaps “thinking of yourself less” looks like donating whatever extra you might have to an organization that’s providing relief to those who have been financially impacted by the virus. In a time when too many people are struggling with the isolation of social distancing... perhaps “thinking of yourself less” looks like reaching out, regularly and intentionally, to check in on those who might feel overwhelmed or alone. In this season of coronavirus, maybe that’s what humility looks like. Maybe that’s what the triumph of humility looks like. Maybe that’s what riding-into-Jerusalem-on-a-donkey looks like. Try it this week. Think of it as a test drive.

Friends, we are Christian people. We follow the One who tells us that true greatness comes in being a servant to all. We follow the One who calls us to serve him by serving others. We follow the One who chooses the path of love and humility over the path of power and self-importance. We follow the One who rides that path on the back of a humble donkey.

And if we're really going to follow this One -- especially in the face of this pandemic -- then it's time to live with a "donkey" level of humility. This time, more than any time that I've lived through, confronts us with what it means to live with Christ-like humility, what it means to think of yourself less and think of others more. So at the start of this Holy Week, may you take the time to consider and pray and plan for what it will look like for you to 'think of yourself less', to embrace Jesus' humility, to act on it. At the start of this Holy Week, may you saddle up next to Jesus and take a donkey test drive of your own.

John 12:12-15, NRSV

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Gathering:

- introductions
 - scattered, meeting online
 - God is bigger...
- Palm Sunday
 - wanted to be here with you, to hand you your palms, to wave them together
 - even thought through some ideas
 - remembered words I heard this week: when you go out, act as if someone's life depends on it... because someone's life depends on it
 - the palms are great... but our lives don't depend on them. Palm Sunday doesn't even depend on them.
- We can celebrate Palm Sunday anyway. Jesus is still coming, so shout "hosanna!"

Offerings:

- so incredibly grateful to all of you who have continued to give, to support our church's ministry and mission
- you are making a difference, because we need the church now more than ever
- Give:
 - visiting our website, wesleychurch.com, clicking red "Give Today" button, one-time or recurring gifts
 - downloading the Give+ app on your smartphone or tablet, searching by name or zip code for our church
 - send checks through the mail -- still have personnel coming in to check mail and process these donations
- Use this time of offering to:
 - write a check
 - address an envelope or put on a stamp
 - log on a make a gift
 - whatever it looks like for you to make your offering

Announcements:

- Worship experiences for Holy Week
 - Conference-wide, led by bishop - Wednesday, 11:00 AM (epaumc.org for more info)
 - Maundy Thursday & Good Friday - livestream at 7:00 PM, both nights
 - Interactive:
 - Maundy Thursday -- gathering some bread, bowl/basin of water, set up wherever you're livestreaming... we'll invite you to use those to participate in the services
 - Good Friday -- find a candle and some matches, we'll be inviting you to participate in our service in that way
 - Easter Sunday: next Sunday morning at 10:00 AM
 - How I wish we could gather together!
 - It's more important to me that you're still here next year for Easter than for you to be here at the church this Easter.
 - Whether in-person or online... Christ will still be risen, my friends. We are not powerful enough to stop that.
- via Zoom:
 - Bible studies: today at 1:00 PM, Wednesday at 4:00 PM (contact us for access)
 - Prayer Team: Thursday at 10:00 AM
 - Church Council -- I'll see you in a little while
- Thank yous:
 - If you can hear us, that because of Ricky Bell on our sound board
 - If you can see us, that's because of Sue Kiefner managing our video feed
 - If you can interact with us, that's because of Christine Bainbridge on our Facebook page
 - If you've been inspired by prayer and scripture and song, that's because of Becky and Brian Graybeal and Pastor Debbie
 - If you are worshipping with us at all... that's because of the incredible support -- spiritual gifts, financial gifts, words of encouragement -- of the people of Wesley Church. We are people blessing people, now more than ever.