

“The Lord Needs It”
Mark 11:1-11; Psalm 118: 19-29

The past couple of weeks have not been kind to my University of Kentucky basketball team, defeated in the also ran NIT tournament coupled with a less than desirous coaching change. Of course, when people ask me about the demise of my Kentucky Wildcats, I quickly remind them that we now consider ourselves a *football* school.

But I did watch the opening of the NIT game between Kentucky and UNLU. They met in Lexington, Kentucky, but since Rupp Arena had a previous engagement, they played the game in Memorial Coliseum. Now, Memorial Coliseum was the home of Kentucky basketball until Rupp Arena was built in 1976. Back before college basketball became a huge business populated by gigantic arenas, Memorial Coliseum’s 11,500 seats provided a wonderful atmosphere where one’s heroes seemed bigger than life. During my junior high and senior high years, my Dad and I would travel down to the UKIT, Kentucky’s former Christmas tournament. These games were not part of the season ticket package, so common people like us could find tickets for the two night tournament, often by standing out in the cold in front of the Coliseum to see if anyone had an extra ticket, or maybe even asking the bartender at the old Phoenix Hotel if he had any available. One way or the other we always found a way in. My Dad could remember buying tickets with Cliff Hagen’s and Frank Ramsey’s names on them, back when they gave players free tickets to sell.

On the same floor occupied by teams like the Fiddlin’s Five and Rupp’s Runts, I watched all my boyhood heroes. I saw Bill Bradley, before he was a Senator or a Knick drop forty-seven points on Wisconsin in the 1963 consolidation game. I watched Cotton Nash, Bobby Cox, Kyle Macy, Dan Issel and Goose Givens.

But what I remember most is the feeling that engulfed you when you entered the building. Walking down the hall past the national championship trophies, paired with pictures of their teams, a sense of history and pride began to seep into your very being. And then you came out of the tunnel into the brightly lit arena. At that time, the four national championship banners greeted you and reminded you that this was serious business. Back then everyone dressed up for the games, coat and tie. The cheerleaders were all girls, and the men wore short little basketball trunks. As the pep band played all eyes were drawn to the short, pudgy, bald man standing with his arms crossed accompanied by his customary scowl. The Baron of the Bluegrass, the Man in the Brown Suit, Coach Adolph Rupp reigned over his empire.

So, on that Monday night three weeks ago, as I watched a game once again take place in Memorial Coliseum, I was reminded of all the memories, all the symbols and legends that a young boy naturally learns growing up in Kentucky.

Now, why do I tell all of you Clemson, North Carolina, Duke, Wake Forest, Georgia, South Carolina, Wofford, Furman, etc. fans all this? Because if you can resurrect in your mind the memories, symbols, folklore and legends of your school, church, or family, then you can understand what happened on Palm Sunday. Think of the emotions, memories, and stories you associate with Death Valley, between the hedges, the Dean Dome, a houndstooth hat, or the cross and its two shadows in our sanctuary that we will see again next week, and you begin to conceive Jesus' purpose on that first Palm Sunday. For on that day, Jesus intentionally called to mind, portrayed, the beliefs and symbolism of a Jewish King and Messiah.

Our story takes place at the beginning of what we now call Holy Week. It is Sunday, and Jesus has walked from Jericho to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. The home of Jewish kings and prophets, the magnificent Temple welcomed up to three million Jews for their faith's most important festival commemorating their escape from Egyptian slavery.

Stopping at the small village of Bethany, the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, Jesus sends two of his disciples into the adjoining village saying, "As soon as you enter you will find a donkey that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it to me. If anyone asks why you are doing this say, 'The Lord needs it.'"

So, the disciples do as they are told, find the donkey, untie it, and sure enough some of the bystanders say, "Hey, what are you guys doing?" And they reply, "The Lord has need of it." Upon which, the bystanders allow them to take the animal.

When they return, the disciples place their coats on the donkey, making a saddle, and Jesus climbs on. And as they proceed down from the Mount of Olives toward the city gate into Jerusalem, many people, likely pilgrims on their way into Jerusalem for Passover, throw their coats and branches on the road in front of Jesus and proclaim, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

With this acclamation, Jesus enters Jerusalem and proceeds to the Temple where he looks around and then heads back to Bethany.

A couple of years ago, Amy Jill Levine was here at Westminster as our Heritage Lecturer. An Orthodox Jew, she is a professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt University. In her book, *The Misunderstood Jew*, she tells about moving her Jewish family to Nashville and when they passed Vanderbilt's Benton Chapel, her four-year-old son looked up at the cross on top of the spire and exclaimed to his mom, "Look mommy, lower case t."

That first Palm Sunday in Jerusalem, Jesus wanted to be certain no one incorrectly interpreted the biblical messianic symbols he was embracing.

All four gospel writers record the event we now call Palm Sunday. Mark's description is the most concise, and probably the oldest. What is essential to

understanding the episode is realizing that Jesus deliberately chose and orchestrated this sequence. Why? Because he wanted to make a statement.

For instance, every Clemson fan from the time they are this high knows that when their football team runs down that hill in Death Valley, they touch the rock for luck. Both ritualistic and symbolic, it declares, “I am a Clemson football player and I have come today to carry my team to victory.”

Every Jew knew the Messiah would appear on the Mount of Olives, Zechariah 14:4. Would arrive on a donkey, Zechariah 9:9. That a donkey never ridden made it fit for sacred use. I Samuel 6:7 where the cows selected to pull the ark of the covenant are those “upon which there has never been a yoke.” Every Jew knew that when Jehu was anointed king by Elisha in II Kings 9:13, the crowd threw their garments in his path as a sign of respect. The bystanders that day knew the term “Hosanna” in II Samuel 14:4 and II Kings 6:26 was a word used to address kings. And that the words they recited from Psalm 118 were a royal psalm.

Each element of the story says, “This is the Messiah. This is the King.” And this was not happenstance, or miraculous, or serendipity. Jesus chose to fulfill the prophecy, the scripture, the vision of God’s Messiah. Jesus knew what he was doing.

Scholars may argue over how many people really participated in this event, or whether the obtaining of the donkey was prophetic forethought or elaborate preparation. But none of that mitigates the obvious theme and truth of this story. Jesus intentionally tapped into the feelings, emotions, symbols, and beliefs concerning the Jewish Messiah. With planning and intention, every move he made declared, “I am the Messiah.”

A couple of years ago when Jean and I were in Moscow, we visited the Novodevichy Cemetery, the resting place of many of Russia’s political and cultural leaders. One grave you can visit in Nikita Khrushchev’s, Premier of the Soviet Union from 1954 – 1963. You have to search for it because it is partially hidden by a large bush. Khrushchev left office in disgrace, ousted by hard liners.

Today, in America, we recall Khrushchev as a bad man, the one who attempted to bring missiles to Cuba. But he was actually the first Soviet ruler who had a real interest in his people. He instituted civil reforms and placed fifty-three million homeless people into apartments. And after he was ousted, Russia suffered through two decades of stagnation.

But what I found most interesting was a story the guide told us about an event most of us older people remember. We recall Khrushchev banging his shoe on the desk at the UN. And we vividly recollect his comment to America when he said: “We will bury you.” The guide told us that the Soviet translator lost his job that day because what Khrushchev really said was: “We will progress past you,” a far more gentle sentiment.

Well, Jesus did not want there to be any doubt what he was saying. Employing biblical and cultural symbols and actions, he declared, “I am the Messiah.”

So, why is it important to understand that Jesus intentionally fulfilled the messianic expectations? Because he also intentionally changed them. With his actions, Jesus assumes the role of the Messiah. But he also employs these actions, these symbols, to declare that he is different from what the people expected, or even wanted.

It is easy for us to understand the Jewish people’s longing for a battle ready Messiah. They have lived their lives as a conquered, subservient people. Their Temple has been desecrated, their faith scorned. The stories of David, Solomon and Samson fill their imaginations with the longing for a king who will restore their glory, their dignity, their faith, their future. Their hopes and dreams, what they desired for their children and grandchildren are wrapped up in the image of a Messiah who would physically free his people.

And then Jesus shows up. With symbols and actions proclaims that he is the Messiah, God’s emissary. But, his kingdom, his freedom, his salvation will take a very different form.

The central prop in this drama is the donkey. The choice of a donkey symbolized and proclaimed what type of Messiah Jesus would be. When a king went to war, he rode a horse. When he came in peace, he approached on a donkey. Jesus would conquer with love instead of the sword. In his weakness, we would discover his strength. Riding on that donkey, Jesus reconfigures the Messiah’s ideal and purpose.

It is unlikely the crowd that day understood this change. Probably, they thought Jesus represented the old methodology, a warrior king who would drive out the hated Romans and restore Jewish pride. So they were correct that Jesus was the Messiah, but wrong in the kind of Messiah he would be.

But is that not also our dilemma, our challenge? We gladly welcome Jesus as our Messiah, the one who will save us. We sing hymns, verbally acclaim the entry of Jesus into our lives. But then we also draw back when the Messiah is different from what we anticipated or desired — demanding love over domination, humility instead of self righteousness, compassion in place of power, generosity and sacrifice rather than self absorption. On this Palm Sunday, we still welcome Jesus into our lives, but we also struggle to accept the type of Messiah he is, and the kind of Christian he call us to be.

Nine-year-old Joey was asked by his mother what he had learned in Sunday School. “Well, Mom, our teacher told us how God sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. When he got to the Red Sea, he had his army build a pontoon bridge and all the people walked across safely. Then he radioed headquarters for reinforcements. They sent bombers to blow up the bridge and all the Israelites were saved.”

“Now, Joey, is that really what your teacher taught you?” his mother asked.

“Well, no, Mom. But, if I told it the way the teacher did, you’d never believe it!”

Seeing Jesus proclaim himself as a Messiah of peace instead of war, love instead of hate, forgiveness instead of revenge, was not something the people that day, or you and I, readily accept.

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It would be fitting for us to paraphrase these words of Jesus to say, “The Lord needs you.” As the donkey carried Jesus into Jerusalem proclaiming who he was and what he intended to do, now we are the vehicle for his work and word. What we do and say proclaims to the world what Jesus intends and desires.

This morning, do you believe Jesus is the Messiah? Are you and I prepared, and willing, to carry to the world, and to live in our own lives, the message of a Messiah who demands love over hate, humility over domination, others before self, donkeys instead of horses?

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