

“Sit Up!”

A sermon in the Lenten series

“Listen Up!”—Following Jesus More Closely

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April 9, 2017—Sixth Sunday in Lent—Palm Sunday

- Matthew 21:1-11 ⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”
- Zechariah 9:9 Rejoice, rejoice, people of Zion!
Shout for joy, you people of Jerusalem!
Look, your king is coming to you!
He comes triumphant and victorious,
but humble and riding on a donkey –
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Jesus calls us to sit up and take notice of need in the world... and to respond to what we notice in Christian love and compassion.

When I was a kid I was pretty squirmy. Couldn't sit still. At the dinner table I'd often slip out of my chair, perhaps to go get something from the fridge, or to pick up my dropped napkin... again!, or maybe just to walk around for no apparent reason. Drove my father nuts. He'd snarl, “Get up and sit down.” Oh, he said it to my sister and my brothers, too... but not nearly as much. “Get up and sit down.” By the time I was in grade school I remember realizing that the expression didn't exactly make sense: “Get up...? and sit down??”

Well, there's something in today's gospel story that doesn't exactly make sense, either. And the story is so familiar to many of us that we don't even notice the incongruity, though it's stated quite plainly.

The story of Palm Sunday is the story of the culmination of a journey that had taken about three years. It was for about that length of time that Jesus and his disciples had gone from place to place in Palestine – going north into the Galilee, south into Judea, east across the Jordan. Jesus and his crew had been teaching and preaching, healing and comforting, encouraging and empowering. All the while they had been under the watchful eye of the occupying forces of the Roman army lest they stir up civil unrest. And all the while they had been within view of the squinting, suspicious religious leaders. From time to time the leaders had questioned Jesus, challenged him, scolded him, and yes, warned him: they warned him against questioning the ways of their ancestors. The leaders cautioned Jesus not to contradict the ways of their tradition. The leaders challenged him when he seemed to suggest that God might be doing something new.

Now, after three years, Jesus was bringing his Good News Tour to the center of Jewish religious activity: to Jerusalem, the capital, the holy city, the Big Apple – no, the “Big Fig.” Of all the ways he could have chosen to enter the city, Jesus selected a method that was sure to make the religious leaders “sit up and take notice”: he chose to embody Zechariah's familiar prophecy about God's new king.

How familiar was Zechariah's prophecy? Let me put it this way: let's say you were to hear a preacher begin to read “And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping

watch over their flock by night.”¹ When you hear those words you’d *know* that an angel was about to announce the birth of Jesus. As well as you know the Christmas story, that’s how familiar the Jewish people were with Zechariah’s prophecy – it meant that God’s long-awaited messiah would come not as an aggressive conqueror but as a “Prince of Peace.” Zechariah prophesied to the Jewish people, “...your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey....” That’s how Jesus chose to enter Jerusalem; that’s how Jesus chose to approach the seat of civil and religious power.

Earlier I noted that there’s something in today’s gospel story that doesn’t exactly make sense. Jesus had instructed his disciples to bring him a donkey and its colt. Matthew writes, “The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on *them*, and he sat on *them* [emphasis added].”²

Was Jesus sitting on two animals at once, like some trick rider at a rodeo? How would anyone simultaneously ride a full-grown donkey *and* its little foal? And why do the other three gospels mention *only* the baby donkey? That’s because Mark, Luke and John understood a characteristic of Hebrew poetic expression that Matthew apparently took literally. You see, Hebrew poetry often provides emphasis by restating an idea in a slightly different way. A clear example of this “emphasis-by-restatement” is heard at the beginning of Isaiah Chapter 60. Listen how the assurance of God’s presence is emphasized by using various terms for brightness or light:

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
²For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.³

With this bit of insight into how Hebrew poetry works you understand that Zechariah’s prophecy about God’s anointed savior entering Jerusalem didn’t involve two animals; the Hebrew poetry simply used the similar terms “donkey,” “colt,” and “foal” to emphasize that this king would make the shocking choice of riding a humble donkey rather than a majestic stallion or an exotic elephant.

So yes, it was momentous for Jesus to bring his message of compassion and acceptance to the people and the religious leaders of Jerusalem. But it was also significant how Jesus chose to enter the holy city. He used a mode of transport that would make the religious leaders and all of Jerusalem “sit up and take notice” that in him God was fulfilling Zechariah’s promise that “...your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey..., ...the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.”⁴

In this Lenten sermon series called “Listen Up!” we’re encouraged to notice what Jesus was “up to” in his day-to-day activities and to consider what he wants us to be “up to” in his name. The story of his Palm Sunday approach to Jerusalem sitting on a donkey calls us to “sit up and take notice.” What’s more, we’re called not simply to notice but to respond to what we notice in Christian love and compassion.

What would it mean for us to notice and respond in Christian love and compassion? An example: Ohio has been said to be “the heart of it all,” and sadly that is the case in the opioid epidemic that is sweeping the nation. It’s easy to dismiss its victims as “those addicts” of questionable character and weak self-discipline. But the truth is that some look to drugs to ease an emotional or even physical pain that has overwhelmed them. Others find themselves sucked into an addiction after having used medications that were legally prescribed and appropriately used. It could be your brother after his divorce and job loss. It could be your best friend after she has knee surgery. It could be your grandchildren after they had their wisdom teeth removed. These are people whose brains are affected by a medical condition called addiction. We are called to sit up and notice that persons with addiction need our prayers, yes. They also

¹ Luke 2:8 King James Version

² Matthew 21:6-7 New Revised Standard Version

³ Isaiah 60:1-2 New Revised Standard Version

⁴ Zechariah 9:10b-c New Revised Standard Version

need our personal encouragement as they seek medical treatment. And they need us to support private and public programs that offer treatment of the brain disease of addiction, giving them the hope for recovery.

The danger of global saber-rattling... dictators desperately clinging to power by harming and killing their own citizens... this and more provides us with other opportunities to “sit up and take notice.” There are no easy answers to the question, “What can little-old-me do in the face of chemical attacks on innocent Syrian civilian children and men and women?” Who knows the proper action or reaction to the provocative missile testing by North Korea’s mentally unstable leader? By remaining silent we appear to condone the acts of inhumanity. But we are the people of “turn-the-other-cheek,” so we pray that God the Holy Spirit will spare the world a destiny in which violence begets violence. Instead we pray that hardened hearts will be softened and closed minds will be opened so that the blessings and freedoms that we enjoy in this “land of the free” will be enjoyed by people the world over.

Before we feel totally mired in the sad and tragic struggles of the world, let us also sit up and take notice of signs of hope being revealed in our midst. For instance, how can young people of color navigate complex issues of racism, violence and discrimination? Right here in Cleveland a revolutionary program empowers African-American, Hispanic, Asian and Middle Eastern youth by giving them free cameras to express their thoughts and feelings through creative photography.

The program, called Shooting Without Bullets, uses photography, expressive arts, and open-dialogue to focus on positive identity development in what they call “black and brown teens.” The program helps youth process some of the complex social problems they experience, including police encounters and racial injustice. Shooting Without Bullets provides an expressive platform for them to inform and impact juvenile justice-related reform. Shooting Without Bullets hosts pop-up art exhibitions that highlight the experiences of teens that usually aren’t heard in public decision-making processes. The exhibits give them a fair chance to speak for themselves through artistic expression. Imagine how society will be enabled to sit up and take notice and gain respect for the young people as they help us understand the unique challenges they face in our society.⁵

Another sign of hope for which we can sit up and take notice is found in our participation in that annual special offering called “One Great Hour of Sharing.” Begun after World War II by a consortium of religious bodies including Presbyterians, the One Great Hour of Sharing got its name from the suggestion that a person donate an amount equal to one hour’s wages for each of the six weeks of Lent. What does “OGHS” – One Great Hour of Sharing – make possible?

- Through our participation in OGHS we show our conviction that everyone should have access to safe drinking water.
- We show our conviction that people should be afforded opportunities for self-development because they want to be able to provide for their families and support their own communities.
- Through OGHS we support both emergency food aid and programs to develop sustainable food production.
- And through OGHS we enable Presbyterian Disaster Assistance to respond to human and natural disasters with medical aid, crisis counseling, and emergency food and shelter.

One Great Hour of Sharing is a tangible sign that as followers of Jesus we do, indeed, “sit up and take notice” of the plight of people in this country and anywhere in the world.

The familiar Palm Sunday story seems like a description of a joyful parade escorting a revered figure into a city. But this morning we realize the powerful symbolism behind the act of Jesus riding a humble donkey into the center of the religious establishment. Then and today the Prince of Peace wants us to sit up and take notice of the power and the hope that peace offers. What’s more, we’re called not simply to notice; Jesus calls us to respond to what we notice in Christian love and compassion.

Let us pray. *Holy God, enable us to sit up and take notice of unmet need in the world around us... and to respond with the compassionate love of Jesus. Amen.*

[sermons: se20170409; © 2017 Jon M. Fancher]

⁵ Quoted in part from <http://www.shootingwithoutbullets.org/about/>, accessed 4/6/2017