

04/09/2017 – Palm Sunday

“The Things that Make for Peace” – Rev Seth D Jones ©

Scripture: Luke 19:29-44

In our examination of compassion leading up to our entrance to Jerusalem today, we have seen things are not always as they seem. Jesus seems to be hiding things in parables, in jokes, in an unpredictable future from the perspective of the disciples. Jesus addresses this directly today, saying, “*If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes*” (Lk 19:42). When we experience a visitation from God, and recognize it, we see at once what God is trying to reveal to us and at the same time what we are hiding from God. Light shows us the dark places.

Way back in the 5th book of the Bible, in Deuteronomy 29, it is written, “*The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, to observe all the words of this law*” (Deut 29:29). The secret, hidden things of God are revealed to the children of God. This sounds promising for those of us who align ourselves with the movements of the Holy Spirit within in the name of God’s Son, Jesus Christ – but with the presence of hidden and revealed things, our need for discernment and clear thinking increases rather than decreases.

Our acts of compassion and mercy flow from the hidden, secret things of God to reveal the presence of God to others and the world. There are the hidden and secret things of God, and then there are the things we keep hidden from God.

With that in mind, what is really happening here on Palm Sunday? Does anybody really know what they are doing? The disciples don’t know why they are sent to get a colt or donkey from the city. Are they stealing it? Has Jesus arranged ahead of time for this to happen? It appears the owners don’t know either. Why is there a procession into Jerusalem at all? No one really knows what is going on with the cloaks being laid down. Does the crowd know what they are doing? Or are they just carried away with the cult of personality that has developed around Jesus? What is going on? What I can tell you is that, the deeper I get into my faith life, the more skeptical I am of easy answers for these things. There are many commentators and scholars who seem to know, but that makes me even more skeptical. All the Gospels refer to this story, but none of them really tell us what is going on. Maybe we, in 2017, have heard it too many times. Maybe mysterious and hidden things are meant to be mysterious and hidden.

When the people today see Jesus for who he is, when they sing out, “*Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace and glory in the highest heaven*”, the Pharisees, the very children of God Deuteronomy recognizes, want the people to stop. Jesus on a colt or donkey is a symbol of the Messiah from Scripture, and the coming of the Messiah is a direct threat to the ruling powers of Jerusalem of the day. When the Pharisees’ call for silence, there are layers and layers of hidden negotiations with agents of the Roman Empire, unspoken and secret understandings that keep the wheels of power and control in place. The ruling religious authorities of Jerusalem rely on the propaganda of silence to maintain the benefits of marrying the ancient religion to the present politics of the day.

Jesus responds to the propaganda of silence by saying, “*I tell you, if these were silent, the stones themselves would cry out*” (Lk 19:40). Those who are silenced will reveal themselves through rejoicing for the presence of the king who comes in the name of the Lord. When there are hidden things there are revealed things. If you hear an echo of Jesus’ birth in the hymn of the crowd today, you are not imagining things. In Luke 2, the angels sing “*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!*” (Lk 2:14) in response to the birth of Jesus, the revealing of the light of the world, from a hidden place in mysterious ways.

Do we really know the meaning of what is happening here? Maybe the laying down of the cloaks is reminiscent of when Sir Walter Raleigh lay his cloak over a puddle so Queen Elizabeth could cross over without getting her feet wet – a sign of respect and humbling oneself before royalty and power.

I suspect the act in our Gospel reading today has something to do with respect and humility. Since we are talking about hidden and revealed things today, the disciples removing their cloaks and laying them on the road seems to suggest that, in the same way God reveals himself through Jesus, so also we reveal ourselves by taking off those things we use to hide things from God. In the revealing of God through Jesus, we reveal ourselves to God. Then we lay those things before the one who is going to the Cross as he walks over them, victorious over the things we keep hidden from God.

And there is a colt. In the Gospel of Luke, we are presented with a colt for Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem, but the other gospels all refer to the creature as a donkey. Donkeys are symbols of peace. Kings would ride into town on a donkey when they came in peace; they would ride into town on a steed when they were victorious in war or taking over a city. In the Gospel of Matthew, our story today is told this way, “*Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them’*” (Mt 21:1b-3).

Today, a colt, or the colt of a donkey, supposedly reveals Jesus to be the Messiah to the disciples of Jerusalem. The people seem to suggest this, but Jesus doesn't say anything about it.

Is this what Jesus intended? We don't know. The donkey seems to be the vehicle of God's revelation.

There is another story of a donkey who reveals things to people in Scripture. It happens in the 4th book of the Bible, the Book of Numbers. In chapter 22, a prophet named Balaam is riding his donkey towards a war. There has been all kinds of political intrigue that led up to the war, and Balaam is caught in the middle. Balaam rides on his trusted donkey along the road and an angel of the Lord with a flaming sword appears in the road. The donkey stops, because the donkey sees the angel. Angels are not hidden from the creatures of the earth, but the angel is hidden from Balaam. Like Balaam, we often do not see the things of God because we keep things hidden from God. I don't know what Balaam was hiding from God, but Balaam has no concern that his donkey starts talking to him.

The donkey tells Balaam that he cannot walk past the angel in the road. Balaam yells at his donkey and calls it names because Balaam does not see. He does not recognize, as Jesus says today, the '*visitation from God*'. Balaam and his donkey go back and forth until Balaam beats his donkey, to which the donkey says, "*Why do you strike me? ... Am I not your donkey which you have ridden all your life until this day? Why would you do this to me?*" (Num 22:28-30). Balaam does not trust what his talking donkey sees. Balaam keeps the presence of God hidden from himself. This is not what the creatures of God do.

The donkey is the vehicle that reveals the mysterious, hidden things of God to Balaam.

"*The Lord needs it*", Jesus says today. We don't think about God needing anything, but perhaps God needs to be revealed through Jesus Christ. Perhaps God needs to hear the cries of those who have been hidden. God needs things from us. God needs a vehicle to reveal God's peace and glory to the world, and there are so many ways we keep God's needs hidden from ourselves and the world.

Certainly, we need what the people celebrate today. "*Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace and glory in heaven be his forever!*" The people in Syria need God's peace, especially those who were killed in the sarin gas attack at the beginning of the week, and then those who were bombed with Tomahawk cruise missiles on Thursday night. They need it because we certainly aren't providing that peace. The people in Mosul, Iraq need God's peace, as they watch their ancient city leveled by air strikes and bombings every day. The people of the superpowers need God's peace, as we push the needle ever closer to yet one more war with powerful weapons of death and drones that kill without regard for civilian or warrior. We need God's peace and glory right here, in

hospitals, in addiction clinics, in homes where abuse is happening and children are hungry. Today, on Palm Sunday, God's peace and our glorification of it is the essence of compassion.

But what if God needs these things also? "*The Lord needs it*". The Lord needs the things which reveal God to the world. God needs a vehicle of revelation. The Lord needs us to lay down the things we use to hide ourselves from God.

The mysteries of God, the hidden things of God, are many. And the ways we seek to hide things from God are also many. We cloak ourselves in excuses, justifications, beliefs as a way to hide from God and one another. Like the Pharisees, we cloak those things we wish to hide in a propaganda of silence. In the Gospel of Luke, the presence of God serves a primary purpose – God's glorious revelation to the world is also the way to peace among people. The things that make for peace demand respect for the hidden things of God, and the things that make for peace demand a revealing of the things we keep hidden from God.

In Paul's 1st Letter to the Corinthians, he speaks to the depths of the mysteries when he says, "*these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.*" (1 Cor 2:10). If the Holy Spirit is searching the depths of God, it is likely not only is there much that has been revealed to us in the visitation of God upon us through Jesus Christ, but it is even more likely there is much, much more that has yet to be revealed, and thus much that is shrouded in mystery. It is one of the ways of God's presence with us.

The compassionate hiddenness of God in our lives, even as we honor God's arrival in glory and on lowly vehicles of revelation, like colts and donkeys.

The God who reveals himself through his creatures and creation is the same God who calls us into the deep mysteries of faith. The Messiah who reveals himself on a donkey is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. And it is right here that our conspiracies of silence and hiddenness break down. Like the disciples, we lay down our cloaks before the one who comes in the name of the Lord and we sing peace and glory to his presence. Like the disciples today, we celebrate the ways in which God reveals God's love to the world.

Amen.