

“Vehicle to Glory”
Palm Sunday Sermon
March 25, 2018
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
Mark 11:1-11

How do you get from here to there? Whether you are getting to work, church, school, or the things you do for relaxation and fun, you probably have your favorite mode of transportation. Especially if you are a morning commuter, your decision of whether to take a bus, ferry, drive, Uber, bike, subway, carpool, or some combo of these is probably made of a complex formula that takes into account timing, comfort level, cost, the environment, need for exercise, traffic, need for personal space, and what you are doing at work that day-- in other words, how ragged can you afford to look and feel before you have a meeting?

I might have the easiest commute of anyone in this room, except perhaps for our volunteers and students. I live about a half mile from church, so unless it is pouring rain or I am doing something further away like hospital visits, I walk to church as much as I can. Sometimes I find I can do ministry along the way, such as when I see Leo playing basketball with his friends in the park, or talk with a stranger and tell them about our church.

The actor Cynthia Nixon just announced last week her candidacy for New York Governor, and if you saw her campaign ad, you would have noticed transportation had a big role. The ad shows her descending the stairs to the New York Subway, and also shows her riding a train, where the announcer's voice can be heard, “Next stop, Albany.” By riding the subway in her ad, she is trying to show she is like the millions of other New Yorkers who ride the subway every day, and also indicates a campaign promise to

improve the subway infrastructure. Now, some have already come out to criticize yet another New Yorker without much political experience who would use their fame as a vehicle to get to political power. I'm not a New Yorker so I don't have much skin in the game, but I will be interested to see where this campaign transports her.

Jesus made a clear statement in his choice for transportation as he moved from Bethany to Jerusalem, just over 2 miles away. He asked his disciples to untie a colt at the gate: if anyone asks why, say "The Lord needs it and we'll get it back to you right away." The bystanders allowed the disciples to take the colt. And that was Jesus' vehicle to get to Jerusalem: a colt-- probably a donkey-- that had never been ridden. As you can imagine, this is hardly the kind of animal a king would ride on. Donkeys are humble creatures, and tend to be beasts of burden. Often it is the poor who operate a donkey, using it to plow the fields or to carry heavy loads. Jesus' vehicle to Jerusalem gave a message about what kind of power he would have and how he would use it. Remember, just because Jesus' ride may have seemed meek or weak, it did not mean that Jesus was without power; instead it meant he was using power differently.

And, we remember, Mary rode a donkey as her vehicle to Bethlehem, where she would deliver the Christ child. With that ride came all the hope and expectation of what it meant for God to enter the world in human flesh. But this time, instead of coming to a place where he would be born, Jesus is approaching the place where he would die. The question lingered: would this be God's exit from the world?

I've always lived in or near major urban areas, so I've never spent much time with donkeys. The donkey I have come to know most closely is Yonkey, who I have known from my time at Campbell Farm, on the Yakima Indian Reservation where our church went on mission trip last year. Yonkey is soared the life of a beast of burden, probably because his furry body is so twisted you could probably never load anything onto his back.

Donkeys usually have a thin line of fur that follows their spine from the mane to the tail. On Yonkey, this line is a meandering path that travels down the side of his ribcage before it finds its way to his rear. I'm not sure whether his spine is similarly shaped, or whether he has one or more large tumors that distort his flesh. Regardless, Yonkey gets lots of attention and love and tasty foods from the children of the reservation, many of whom bear their own scars— though theirs are more often internal. Theirs are the wounds left by abuse and family addictions and poverty, which has its roots in years of exploitation by the people who took their lands and forced them to change their ways of life. If their bodies could represent the internal pains they have experienced, they may come out looking twisted like Yonkey's body. And yet the kids are taught that even with these wounds, they are worthy of receiving love and care. They are worthy of being treated with respect, worthy of not being harmed. Inasmuch as they come to see Yonkey as a creature of sacred worth, they also come to see themselves as creatures of sacred worth— and to treat each other as such.

The processional that brought Jesus into Jerusalem was a march that would point the people towards important change: a change in their relationship with power-- including power over them, as well as their own personal and collective power-- and a change in their relationship with God.

The people had lined the streets with their cloaks and with leafy branches from the fields. Not exactly a red carpet, but it was the best of what they had and what they could find. Their shouts, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosannah in the highest heaven!" spoke of great faith and expectation in the age Jesus was ushering forward. Not only that; their words speaking of Jesus and his kingship would have been considered sedition-- or unlawful disloyalty-- to the Roman Emperor. The Palm Sunday march would have looked like David to Rome's Goliath.

Several of us were part of a March yesterday that was also about power. I marched in New York City, and as I listened to the speeches I was struck that the voices, the vehicle for claiming power in this movement to stop gun violence, did not come from politicians. It did not come from celebrities. It did not even come from people like me. The vehicle for this movement that has called millions into action is largely the meekest, the ones you would not expect: they are, in their gawky splendor and beauty, their idealism that hasn't been shattered with their innocence at seeing their peers killed, the teenagers of America. Let me tell you, they are not too happy with the state of the country we have left for them, and they aren't going to wait for grown-ups like me to change things.

Jan Edmiston, who is one of the co-moderators of the Presbyterian Church (USA), wrote this week, "The March for Our Lives on Palm Sunday weekend is perfect. Greek ὡσαννά (hōsanná) is from Hebrew הושיעה-נא, הושיעה נא (hōshia-nā') related to Aramaic אושענא ('ōsha'nā) meaning "save, rescue, savior." For 1000s of years, God has called us to march for what we believe. And then serve."

Hosannah: save, rescue, savior. If Jesus' way of getting to Jerusalem-- a humble colt-- said something about his ways of getting to power and getting to God, what then was his salvation about? What was, what is, Jesus rescuing or saving us from? When we say Hosannah to Jesus, what do we mean?

My friend, The Rev. Emily Heath, went to seminary the same time as I did and now serves as a police chaplain in New Hampshire in addition to pastoring a church there. Reflecting on her participation in yesterday's march, Emily wrote these words:

"Have you ever been with a parent when they've been told that their child died?

I have. Dozens of times.

You bring them to a room with a closed door and then you ask them to sit down. You do this because you know that when they hear they will probably collapse and fall to the ground. But they already know something is up by now, so sometimes they will stay standing, demanding information. When it comes, when the doctor or police officer or coroner says those dreaded words, you will be standing behind them, ready to catch them before they hit the floor.

When you work as a chaplain who responds to trauma, some days you will wonder whether that's your job; to catch the heartbroken as they fall.

The gunshots are the worst. You will sit with the mother whose son is bleeding out. There was nothing the doctors could do in surgery except to slow down the bleeding enough for her to say goodbye.

You will coach her through the last things to say: I love you, I'm sorry, I forgive you, I'll be okay, and it's okay to go. You will know some of those are lies. She won't be okay; at least not for a while. And it's not okay for him to go; at least not this way.

That night you'll go home. You'll try to wash his blood out of your white shirt. It won't come out. That's okay because how could you ever wear it again anyway?

Tomorrow there will be another call. Another chaplain in another city or town will take it. Another family will fall to the ground. It will happen again and again.

Things will change eventually, but unfortunately that might not happen until enough people know someone it happens to; until they can't ignore it anymore. It won't happen until too many people like you meet people like me.

I marched today because I hope someone like me never has to be the one to catch you or someone you love."

One day, almost 2000 years ago, Jesus marched. His movement from here to there was a Hosanna moment, because in his life and in his death he became able, through God's power, to be the one to catch you and to catch me and to catch the ones we love-- and even the ones we don't love.

In his body becoming twisted in agony as he bore the nails of the cross, he endured the pain we experience in our human lives, both physical and emotional. And, in dying, he showed us there is life, and even joy beyond that. He calls us today, in this life, to ask for that salvation so we can experience it now, and not just wait for it to happen to us.

I think that is a movement worth marching with. Hosannah in the highest!