

“When Jesus rides into our lives”

Luke 19:28-40

When Jesus rode into town on a small donkey, he did so on a day that was a work day for the people. Their Sabbath was on Saturday. Sunday was not a day off. It was like our Monday. It was the first day of the work week for them. So, far from being a humdrum, unexciting Sunday, on this particular day, something huge was happening.

For the women, the day after the Sabbath rest, meant it was time to sweep the floors, open the shop, wash the clothes, go to market, get the bread in the oven, and deal with matters from the previous week that had been put aside for the Sabbath. The men went back to work looking forward to a holiday on Thursday when families would gather to celebrate the Passover.

Their Sundays were like our Mondays, the first day of the work week, with the busyness of life resuming after a brief Sabbath pause. Life going on and back to routine.

I know many people find it hard to drag themselves to work on Mondays. It can be so difficult that the very effort to survive Mondays has become the subject of numerous songs over the years. “Rainy days and Mondays always get me down,” sang the Carpenters.

In 1986, Prince wrote a song that was sung by the Bangles called “Manic Monday”.

Six o'clock already
I was just in the middle of a dream
I was kissin' Valentino
By a crystal blue Italian stream
But I can't be late
'Cause then I guess I just won't get paid
These are the days
When you wish your bed was already made

It's just another manic Monday
I wish it was Sunday
'Cause that's my fun day
My I don't have to run day
It's just another manic Monday
Have to catch an early train
Got to be to work by nine
And if I had an air-o-plane
I still couldn't make it on time
'Cause it takes me so long
Just to figure out what I'm gonna wear
Blame it on the train
But the boss is already there

But for many people, particularly those with type-A personalities, and God knows we have some type-A people in this congregation like myself; for us Monday is a pleasure, a day to attack what needs to be done, to jump back in with both feet, to crank things up again, which is why I try to take Fridays off.

So what was Jesus doing on that day? Why would he make a gesture so dramatic that the crowds went wild and praised God? The Pharisees, seeing this, *asked Jesus to stop them* — and by implication, to reject their accolades. What was Jesus thinking?

For years, the church has called this event “The Triumphal Entry,” but that doesn’t fit the biblical description very well. Clearly, it was not a covert operation. There was nothing “black ops” about it. Jesus didn’t slip quietly into the city under the cover of darkness with a team of highly trained operatives whose former occupation was fishing for perch in the Sea of Galilee. No, Jesus enters in plain sight on a busy workday. It was an overt operation.

And why did Jesus follow it the next day with another dramatic public act: the “cleansing” of the temple, where he literally whipped up a frenzy?

We don't know Jesus' motivation, but it does seem that he was forcing the authorities to deal with him.

Go big or go home. Jesus went big.

He was lighting a fuse that exploded later in the week with the bang of the soldiers' hammers as they drove nails into his hands and feet.

Both the entry into the city and the brouhaha in the temple defy the Monday mindset: "No, you can't carry on as usual!" he seems to be shouting. "My kingdom is not of this world, so don't lose it in the mundane of Monday."

His behavior sort of doesn't make sense. Usually, Jesus did not want to be the center of attention. Often, like after he'd healed someone, he'd caution the excited person, "Now, don't tell anyone about this." But maybe that's the point. Jesus took dramatic, out-of-character steps to make something happen — not his death — something else.

New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan suggests that as Passover approached, Jesus came to Jerusalem intentionally "to make twin demonstrations, first against Roman imperial control over the City of Peace and, second, against Roman imperial control over the temple. ... In other words, against the governor Pilate and his high-priest Caiaphas."

As Crossan explains it, Jesus intended his very public entry into Jerusalem on the donkey as not only criticism of Roman power but a *lampoon* of it.

Because people were flooding the city from all over the world for Passover, Pilate would be sure to have traveled from his home base in Caesarea, bringing with him a large contingent of troops.

So Pilate rides into the city in advance of the Passover on a powerful black warhorse bedecked with colors, banners, insignia and armor.

Jesus arrives on a donkey.

All four gospels tell the Palm Sunday story, and the lectionary's choice for it this year is from Luke, but in Matthew's version, he adds the comment that Jesus' action in choosing to ride a donkey with her colt beside her fulfills the words of the prophet Zechariah: "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."

And why? To "cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations ..." (Zechariah 9:9-10).

Contrast Pilate on his stallion with Jesus on a nursing donkey mare with her colt beside her, and you see the intended message: "Peace on earth, yes, but not peace by Rome's violent victory, rather peace by God's non-violent justice," Crossan says.

Likewise, Jesus also forced the issue when he created a disturbance in the temple. By driving out the sellers and moneychangers from the temple, he acted out a parable, says Crossan. The temple was the house of God for all nations, but the temple and its high priest were allowed to function only under the control of Rome, and Jesus' action with the whip declared this unacceptable to God.

Jesus "symbolically destroys the temple's fiscal basis by overturning the tables where monies were changed into the standard donation coinage," Crossan says.

Is Crossan right about Jesus' intention with these two actions? Since none of the gospels tell us otherwise, he may well be. In both cases, Jesus was forcing the issue.

We live in an age when a lot of issues need to be forced into the Mondays of life. We may not like it, but the issues have been forced, and we are compelled to address them or ignore them.

One of those issues was addressed by Bishop Easton in the February issue of the Living Lutheran when she asked the question, "What is to be done?"

Our congregations are growing older and smaller across denominational lines.

I think we are asking the wrong questions.

The questions we are asking have to do about us: "What can we do?" They express loss and grief and fear – loss and grief for what we were and fear about what we will become. Not only do these questions not lead to productive answers, they also don't point to hope. It's as if the church's one foundation rests on us and our efforts.

I think we need to ask: "What is God up to?"

It's clear to me that we are living in a time of transition, especially for the Western church. I don't know how long this transition will last nor do I have a clear vision of what the church is becoming.

The good news is that you and I don't have to have a clear vision because God does. "Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing: now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43:18-19). These words of hope were spoken to the Jews who were stuck in exile. They had lost their land, their temple and their king – the

pillars of their identity. Likewise, the church has lost social status and relevance in 21st Century American culture.

For Israel and the church this would be a hopeless situation, except that God is faithful. When the Lord admonished, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old," this wasn't a command to forget God's past saving work, but to believe that God was still acting. This is true for us today. When we stop asking what we can do to fix the church and start asking what God is up to, we open ourselves up to the life-giving promise of God's future.

Then we are also open to more questions: How is the Spirit reshaping the church? How will Christ use us as Christ's living body in the world?

If we want to attract people to our congregations to rebuild a memory, God will not bless our efforts. But if we—grabbed by the Spirit in baptism, changed by the word, intimately and lovingly connected to Jesus and each other in communion, and set free by grace to serve the neighbor—invite all people into true life, then we shall become part of the answer.

This takes attention and devotion. Worship, prayer, Scripture study, generosity and service—not in order to save the church, but in response to the new life God has given us in Christ.

And one more thing: in God's inscrutable wisdom, God has chosen human hands and voices to tell and welcome. Let's adopt the Metropolitan Washington, D.C., Synod's mission to get more people to know more about Jesus.”

May the peace of God . . .