

## SHOWDOWN IN JERUSALEM

The donkey tells you everything you need to know. Palm Sunday is the beginning of the showdown in Jerusalem.

Pick an image of military might; artillery on parade in Red Square, thousands of soldiers marching in lock step in North Korea and then think of— the donkey— that Jesus insisted carry him into Jerusalem where his death was assured.

Like the Chinese student who put his life on the line in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square, Jesus knew what the showdown meant as Pilate and his imperial forces traveled into Jerusalem from the west every Passover in a staggering show of force.

Jesus came from the east....on a donkey...

Passover celebrated the Jews conquest of over imperial power in ancient Egypt— and Pilate, the Roman emperor, made sure with his show of brute force every Passover that no one would dare think of confronting imperial rule again.

And certainly not with a donkey. What could be more ridiculous?

We're all so ready to race right ahead to Easter...especially for me, at least, when on top of the agony of everything else it became illegal this week in the state of Georgia, to give a drink to a person standing in line, waiting to vote. Even those trying to kill him on the cross responded to his cry of thirst.

We are aching for resurrection. But Palm Sunday reminds us "not so fast."

Jesus is always telling us who he is. And as Maya Angelou so famously said, "When someone shows you who they are believe them ..."

The donkey tells us what Jesus always has: If you want a super hero savior, look to Hollywood and not to me.

Jesus' power, is based on love, not hate, on sacrifice, not exploitation, and liberation, not domination.

Easter, yes, is the ultimate triumph, but Jesus is not a triumphant savior, Thank God.

Until this week, I had mistakenly assumed that the "Hosannas" shouted by the crowds were more akin to Alleluias, joyful shouts of praise. But the Hebrew translation of Hosanna is "Save us." And there was plenty of desperation in the lives of those cheering throngs...poverty, oppression, misery, fear. The list goes on.

More than a year into the pandemic, with more than a half million of our fellow Americans dead, we understand desperation more immediately and more viscerally.

And if we were honest, why wouldn't we take the abracadabra God who can just rescue us and be done with it?

Who would bet on a guy on a donkey with motley crew of disciples and a rag tag crowd of followers with no utterer no power cheering him on?

Palm Sunday is preposterous and loaded with paradox, just like our faith.

As Debie Thomas wrote this week in *Journey with Jesus*:

If the Palm Sunday story is about *anything* it is about dazzling hopes and disappointed expectations. It's a story about what happens when the God we want and think we know doesn't show up, and another God—a less efficient, less aggressive, far less muscular God—shows up instead, and saves us in ways we didn't know were possible."

The road we have all been traveling this year has a lot in common with to the road the plodding donkey traveled.

As author and theologian Frederick Buechner wrote,

Despair and hope. They travel the road to Jerusalem together, as together they travel every road we take—despair at what in our madness we are bringing down on our own heads and hope in him who travels the road with us and for us and who is the only one of us all who is not mad.

This is the week we begin traveling a road of hope that ends in despair, torture, and death. This is the week that will end with Jesus demanding to know why God has abandoned him in screaming agony from the cross.

Crucifixion will come to all of us in this life one way or another. And we can never pretend that our savior doesn't know, or isn't right there with us, in the worst of whatever this life can bring.

What we think we want is so often not what we really need because when we are most desperate we want rescue and we plead to be saved. Hosanna.

As a child, and for decades since, I have loved the hymn, "Ride on Ride on in Majesty" because of the soaring triumphal music carried me right past the "prepared to die" lyrics that follow. But now Palm Sunday is feels different to me. My last name, Palmer, means pilgrim, derived from the Latin word for one who has brought palm branches back from the Holy Land as proof of the journey.

This year then, I bring you the donkey to remind you, and of course me, of who our humble savior and the lack of power, as our world understands it, he represents.

But if the donkey only gets you part way there, I bring you something else. I bring you what Barbara Brown Taylor calls, in her book *God in Pain*, Jesus' obituary.

I bring you this because it helps me understand, what I've always struggled with, how the crowd that could cheer him on Palm Sunday, could jeer him five days later with cries of "Crucify him, crucify him." And while we're on the topic, why did his most beloved disciple betray him and the other disciples run away from the cross? Writes Taylor in Jesus' obituary:

It is an old, old story: Love comes into the world as a little child, fresh from God. When Love grows up, Love feeds people, Love heals people, Love turns things upside down. Love's actions do not set well with the people in charge. They warn Love to leave well enough alone. Love meets hate, meets politics, meets fear. Love goes on loving, which gets Love killed—not by villains in black hats but by people like us: clergy, patriots, God-fearing folk. What brought them together was their rage at him [at Love] for being less than they wanted him to be—or for being more than they wanted him to be—but in any case or not being who they wanted him to be, and they killed him for it.

May we in this holiest of weeks, know in our bones, that Jesus is the savior of love that we, and our weary world needs, as much now and we've ever had before. AMEN