Sermon, March 24, 2024
The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday
"You fool!"
A Sermon by Rev. John Balicki
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

By my count, we've said or sung the word seven times already. It's a word we also say a few times each Sunday but I would wager a guess we rarely say it outside of church. It's "Hosanna". Actually right on the bulletin cover – what a clue! Someone asked me a while back what it meant. I confessed I didn't have a clue. I thought it meant something like, "Praise God" or "You Rock" but in Hebrew, it means something less adulatory and more desperate. Less generous and more demanding. It means, "Save now!"

The context for the Hosannas we heard this morning is what was happening at the western gate of Jerusalem while Jesus rode in on that foolish donkey at the eastern gate. Every year during Passover the Roman governor of Judea would ride up to Jerusalem from his coastal residence in the west. Here's how Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan describe this procession from their book, "The Last Week"

"A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot solders, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful."

According to Roman imperial belief, the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome; he was the Son of God. So for the empire's Jewish subjects, Pilate's procession was both a potent military threat and the embodiment of a rival theology. Armed heresy on horseback.

And to this the people at the eastern gate cried "Hosanna" Save us now. What was going on there?

Jesus clearly planned a counter-demonstration worthy of Abby Hoffman. He knew he was going to enter the city on the back of a donkey; he had already made arrangements to procure one. As Pilate clanged and crashed his imperial way into Jerusalem from the west, Jesus approached from the east, looking (by contrast) ragtag and absurd. His was the procession of the ridiculous, the powerless, and the explicitly vulnerable. As Borg and Crossan remark, *"What we often call the triumphal entry was actually an anti-imperial, anti-triumphal one, a deliberate lampoon of the conquering emperor entering a city on horseback through gates opened in abject submission."*

Elsewhere, Crossan notes that Jesus rode "the most unthreatening, most un-military mount imaginable: a female nursing donkey with her little colt trotting along beside her." In fact,

Jesus was drawing on the rich, prophetic symbolism of the Jewish Bible in his choice of mount. The prophet Zechariah predicted the ride of a king "on a colt, the foal of a donkey." He would be the nonviolent king who'd "command peace to the nations."

I mean who would do something like this? Something to provoke all that military power at the other end of the city. Why you'd have to be a fool!

Lent 2024 has been filled with the foolish acts of Jesus of Nazareth

- Sunday Number 1 Jesus spent 40 days in the desert fasting. His mother must not have known. What Jewish mother would let her boy not eat that long?

- Sunday Number 2 Jesus turns his head toward Jerusalem knowing it was dangerous to do so

- Sunday Number 3 Jesus makes a real mess of the Jerusalem temple, hollers, throws stuff all over the floor, gets everyone upset

- And you know what was really foolish after all that? That he didn't run like heck back to Nazareth and mom's chicken soup. If that was your child, wouldn't you want them to do that? –Wouldn't you do that yourself? Perhaps you avoid being foolish at all costs, Lent or no Lent. You probably have lots of company. Certainly nothing foolish about going home today walking around with a palm branch.

Perhaps we may have discovered this Lent that the path to love is the path thru foolishness or perhaps we still need to find the courage to take the risk. But isn't it foolish to bring a child into the world today or to care for an elderly loved one who is declining in health, to adopt a homeless animal or foster a child? All smells live love.

So here's my Holy Week Challenge.

Think of one small act of foolishness and do it

Think of one small act of love and do it.

Palm Sunday – it's all about foolishness and love – and nothing says that louder than the contrast of what was going on at the eastern and western entrances to Jerusalem. So what did Jesus accomplish with his bit of street theater we celebrate today. Didn't he end up the same as Abby Hoffman? While he might have been foolish, he was no fool; he knew exactly what it would cost him to spit in Rome's face. Like all good comedians, he understood that real humor is in fact a serious business; at its best, it points unflinchingly to truths we'd rather not see.

The truth that was the whole purpose of Jesus' mission: to declare the coming of God's kingdom. A kingdom of peace, a kingdom of justice, a kingdom of radical and universal freedom. A kingdom dramatically unlike the oppressive and violent empire Jesus challenged on Palm Sunday.

So why did Jesus die? Here's how Debie Thomas words it: He died because he unflinchingly fulfilled the will of God. He died because he exposed the ungracious sham at the heart of all human kingdoms, holding up a mirror that shocked his contemporaries at the deepest levels of their imaginations. Even when he knew that his vocation would cost him his life, he set his face "like flint" towards Jerusalem. Even when he knew who'd get the last laugh at Calvary, he mounted a donkey and took Rome for a ride.

Two processions. Two kingdoms. Two symbolic journeys into Jerusalem. Stallion or donkey? Parade or protest? Which will we choose? Sometimes if we're honest wouldn't we rather just wave a palm branch, sing a few rounds of "Hosanna," and go home. The actual praise and worship Jesus invites us to enact today is far riskier; his donkey ride cost him everything. That fool! Don't ever grab a branch and join a parade too casually.