

It’s natural that experiences which seem out of sync or out of context with all that’s gone before are likely to cause fear. We’re made so that routine gives us comfort and makes us feel in control. If you’ve ever read a bedtime story to a child or grandchild, you know they usually want to hear the same story over and over again. If I were to change a word, just for fun, something like, “Red Riding Hood was walking through the forest and came upon a big bad *bear*.” I’m sure they would stop me and say, “Pap! It was a big bad *wolf*!” They know the story by heart and wouldn’t accept any random changes to the plot.

We love stories in which we know who the villain is, who the hero is, and when to cheer or when to boo. That’s a reason why old-fashioned melodrama was so popular. We’re familiar with the scenario. The villain says the heroine must pay a ransom. The heroine says she can’t pay the ransom. Then in just a nick of time the hero appears and pays the ransom. “My hero!” she cries. We know what’s coming long before the story ends but we love it, even as adults.

We’re uncomfortable with people in the public eye who can’t be put neatly into a good or bad category. And it’s getting harder and harder. We want our heroes to be heroes and our villains to be villains. We want security, guaranteed jobs, guaranteed wages, and guaranteed Social Security. We want things to be predictable. But it’s not always wise to settle into a rut that’s too comfortable.

The danger in our desire for routine and familiarity is that in that framework, we tend to think we are in control. I’ve made the point earlier in this sermon series that our insistence on control is one of the most apt characteristics of sin. Particular sins vary greatly from the socially acceptable to those for which we put people in jail. But the source of most of these sins is the desire to *control* everything in our lives, including the lives of our family and friends, and yes, even control God. A psychotherapist once wrote, “Watch out for people who talk about putting things in order. Putting things in order usually means getting other people under control.”

Unfortunately, our efforts to control don't stop at the door of the sanctuary. Even Sunday services of worship tend to fall into all-too-predictable patterns. Back when I was youth director at Harris Street United Methodist Church in Harrisburg, PA I was invited to preach a Lenten sermon. The youth group helped out with my sermon, titled, "Voices from the Balcony." Some students were planted in the balcony where they liked to sit anyway and assumed the roles of various biblical characters, shouting questions at intervals and basically interrupting the sermon. The congregation was unprepared for these outbursts and had a variety of reactions. Some said, "I'll never forget that sermon. God really got my attention." A few folks took offense. "Let's not do that again. It spoiled the reverence of worship for me." I'm guessing they were really saying that it spoiled their snoozing time. Even in worship, we have a need to feel in control. That's why we print a bulletin. We want to know exactly what's coming in the next hour. Worship is the last place most of us would welcome the unpredictable, even if it's a spontaneous movement of the Holy Spirit.

Many of Jesus' movements in his three-year ministry seemed unpredictable in many ways to his followers, especially the jumble of events during that last week in Jerusalem before his crucifixion. The disciples warn him against going there at all. His opponents will be waiting to trap him. It's not a safe place. Nevertheless, Jesus insists they will celebrate Passover there. Then, his entry by means of an impromptu parade once again feels like a strange plot twist.

Let's consider a few of the details: In the middle of all the turmoil of a city crammed with visitors preparing for Passover, Jesus suddenly announces that two disciples should fetch a donkey (at least in Matthew, Mark, and Luke they go and do this). John simply records, "*Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it.*" Do you wonder how the disciples react to this parade plan? I do. The more adventurous ones might welcome it: "Alright Jesus! Just what we needed—a change of pace." But I think more of them would have had an anxiety attack: "Good grief! Does the Master know what he's doing? Does he understand the danger? Does he realize the temple authorities are out to kill him—and us?"

Bruce Larson, in his book, *Living Beyond Our Fears*, speculates how a church today might react to the idea of this hastily assembled parade. We can hear the objections. Has the long-range planning committee been told about this? Has finance OK'd the funds for the donkey? Has the insurance representative been informed about the insurance needs? Do we need to apply for a permit? Has the Session (in Jesus' case Peter, James, and John) given their approval? This Palm Sunday parade is a strange one, no question about it. It's also a puny one, by today's standards. A one-float parade. The extent of it is one man on a donkey.

Since Lent began, we have heard Jesus say over and over, "*Do not be afraid.*" And even in this familiar story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem, the crowd is told not to be afraid. A prophecy from Zechariah comes to mind when Jesus enters Jerusalem. But before that we must understand the context of what is going on. Jesus was in Jerusalem only days before the festival of Passover. There were people gathered from the entire countryside and the excitement surrounding Jesus was at a fevered pitch. It was rumored that he was the Chosen One, the Messiah, the One Israel had longed for! When Jesus rode a young donkey into town, he was in essence identifying himself as the promised Messiah.

What Israel longed for was to be set free from the Romans. They dreamed of no longer living in "fear of conquest," so the arrival of their Messiah riding into Jerusalem was the most welcome sight imaginable. We may not personally experience a "fear of conquest" today, but every one of us lives with different levels of fear at different times in our lives. Sometimes those fears become so great that they threaten things that matter most, like relationships, happiness, or purpose. Maybe like the inhabitants of Jerusalem in the first century, we actually want to be free from the "fear of conquest" as well. And just like them, the sight of our Messiah coming into Jerusalem is something special.

A couple weeks ago when we were in Philadelphia spending the night with grandkids at a suburban hotel with an indoor pool, we had a conversation with our seven-year-old grandson about the rules for swimming. His Grammy said to him "You don't really like being told what to do, do you?" He responded "No." So we suggested that he think ahead and think smart so that he doesn't

have to be told by someone. In this country, we may not live with a “fear of conquest” in the same way the people of Israel did in Jesus’ day, but we live with other types of fear. Many of us are afraid of being told what to do. Yet we don’t like living in fear either—like the fear of experiencing another 9/11.

Have you ever wondered about Jesus’ choice of a donkey on this occasion? Donkeys are shorter than most horses; a colt even more so since they are not quite fully grown. Perhaps the donkey was not just a symbol of humility and peace, but perhaps Jesus chose it because it kept him among, not above, the people. He didn’t come to tell them what to do, but rather what to do with all of their paralyzing fears. Christ is purposefully present among his people—even when they don’t fully understand. We’re just like them. John writes in verse 16: *“At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him...”*

As the Lenten season draws to a close, we have an opportunity to see how every fear that paralyzes us comes to a head when Jesus enters Jerusalem. We don’t fully understand how God works, but we know we are not called just to sit comfortably in church, but to get in line behind Jesus and follow him all the way through Holy Week. The events of Holy Week begin with a reorientation of what kind of King Jesus is; and it includes the ultimate challenge for us of letting the truth come to light, leaving behind our familiar expectations of who God is and what God is up to. Jesus shows us time and again that his is the better way, but we sadly only come to that realization after the fact.

A personal notice appeared in a large city newspaper that said: “To the person who administered CPR on the morning of November 22<sup>nd</sup> to a Mr. Matthews downtown at 2<sup>nd</sup> and Washington. We are very grateful to you for saving our father’s life. You have given us something to be truly thankful for this Thanksgiving.” Heart attacks are usually unexpected. But an unexpected Good Samaritan saw a need and stepped in to help. The heart attack didn’t win. His family’s worst fears were defeated. Dear friends: Don’t be afraid. Whatever fears we find ourselves locked into, we can take heart that the King is coming to free us from every fear! *“Do not be afraid...your King is coming.”* Amen.