

HERE HE COMES AGAIN!

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Grace Church in New York
Palm Sunday + March 25, 2018

Jesus said to them, “*Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it.*” (Mark 11:2)

This past week as I pondered the mysteries of Palm Sunday, I found myself remembering the ancient legend of the Trojan horse. Curious to read the story again, I was certain that I would find it in Homer’s *Odyssey*, and if not there then in the *Iliad*. Alas, it’s a wonder you allow me to climb into the pulpit week after week, harboring such erroneous beliefs as I do. Any one of you could have told me it was the Roman poet Virgil who first spun the tale in his great epic, *Aeneid*. Silly me!

Virgil set the *Aeneid* in a time approximately twelve-hundred years before Jesus. Helen of Sparta, said to be the most beautiful woman in the world, either ran off with, or was abducted by a man named Paris, the Prince of Troy. Helen’s was a face that could launch a thousand ships, so her husband, King Menelaus of Sparta, did just that in the effort to bring her home. Indeed, the Greeks sent upwards of 100,000 troops across the Aegean Sea to attack the city of Troy. The siege lasted for ten long years, but they simply could not breach the walls of the city. As a last resort the great warrior Ulysses devised a scheme. The Greeks built a huge, hollow, wooden horse, left it at the gates of Troy, and retreated back to their ships, giving all appearances that the war was finished. The Trojans didn’t know what to make of the huge horse. Was it a religious offering? Was it a gift in recognition of their military superiority? What should they do with it?

Finally, it was a Greek spy named Sinon who persuaded the Trojans that possessing such a thing would make them invincible. The Trojans believed Sinon. The Trojans opened the gates and brought the horse into the city. Of course, that night, out of the hollow horse crept a number of Greek troops who had stowed themselves inside. They flung open the gates of the city and in poured the whole Greek army, which had not retreated after all. So it was that Troy fell because the Greeks finally found a way into the city.

Today is Palm Sunday. One way to understand this curious day on the Christian calendar is to think of it as the culmination of God’s siege on Jerusalem. By the time Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem, God’s campaign to win back his people had lasted longer than a decade for sure, longer than a century, even longer than many centuries. The writer of Genesis would trace the beginnings of it all the way back to the time when humanity first became conscious of itself. God had made his goodness and love known to us in creation. God had made us to live and love, to laugh and play, to enjoy the fruits of the land and break bread together, to pursue meaning and purpose to our existence, and even to know the Lord in our midst. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had a perfect relationship with the earth, a perfect relationship with each other, and a perfect relationship with God. Were they content? Apparently not. They succumbed to the temptation to run off with the power of sin and death. Or, was it that Satan somehow managed to kidnap the heart and soul of humanity? Either way, a rival power staked a claim to the soul of humanity. Since then God has launched a thousand ships in the effort to reclaim us and bring us home.

One of God’s attempts to breach the walls was in the calling of Israel to be his people. Out of all the nations on earth, God singled out the lowly tribe of the Hebrews to be his chosen people. God heard their cry and rescued them from slavery in Egypt, made promises to them, established them in a land flowing with milk and honey, and loved them with an everlasting love. How did

they respond? Well, they proved to be a stiff necked people who repelled God's advances by grumbling in the desert, fashioning a golden calf, and worshipping it instead of God. Did God give up? No, the siege continued. God sent his Word spoken through the prophets. God commissioned individuals like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Zechariah to speak directly to the various kings of Israel who would dare govern God's people. How did they respond? Again and again they doubled down on their resistance and beat back God's word. Most of the kings preferred to play power politics with the nations rather than trusting in God. As for the prophets, their words would only reach the hearts of the people long after they died. In life the prophets were marginalized, silenced, and killed.

Still the siege continued. Above all, God sent the Word made flesh. In these last days God sent Jesus to be incarnate from the Virgin Mary, to be the Savior and Redeemer of the world. The story of Jesus we are reading this year is the Gospel according to Mark. Mark is entirely unconcerned with the birth of Jesus and what his earliest years might have been like. Instead, by just the 12th verse of the first chapter, Jesus is already wrestling in the desert with Satan, the rival claimant to our souls. As Jesus' ministry continued throughout the Galilean countryside, so also did the skirmishes with the power of evil intensify. The exorcisms and healings suggest that he was traveling deeper into enemy occupied territory. The growing resistance of the ruling powers indicate the commitment of the authorities to rebuff his advances. But then he set his face to go straight to Jerusalem. In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke we read that Jesus wept over the city when he came in sight of it: "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you.*" How would he get past their defenses? How would he breach the walls?

Every year on Palm Sunday, whether we are reading from Mark, Matthew, or Luke, we hear how Jesus took great pains to obtain just the right animal to ride into the city. The disciples were to use a series of prearranged passwords with a secret follower in a nearby town. Mark never mentions that the animal was a donkey. Rather, he calls it a colt, which could just as well be translated to mean a small horse. You may have already guessed that it's here where I began thinking about the Trojan horse in light of the horse that Jesus rode. "But wait," you say. The Trojan horse is universally regarded as an act of treachery. It was a deceitful deed, not a noble undertaking at all. Jesus rode on in majesty, not trickery. How dare I suggest that Jesus would resort to deception!

Before you reject the idea entirely, consider some of the things he said. Consider that it was Jesus who told the parable of the dishonest steward (Luke 16:1-13), in which he made a scoundrel into a hero in the kingdom of heaven. That's right, a series of shady business deals orchestrated by a criminal helps unlock the mystery of how God in Christ reconciles the world to himself. Indeed, some interpreters see in the dishonest steward a foreshadowing of Jesus, who by the end of this week will be condemned as a Roman criminal and die a criminal's death. Suddenly, an old Scripture verse can take on new meaning. St. Paul wrote: *We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21)*. In one of today's readings, St. Paul again wrote that *Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness (Philippians 2:6-7)*. What you see is not what you get! It sounds pretty tricky to me. In today's opening procession that went round and round the church, was that a shrubbery at the top of the pole the acolyte was carrying, or was that a cross in there? What you see is not what you get. Tricky.

If you don't like Jesus the trickster, how about Jesus the robber? Consider something Jesus said earlier in the Gospel of Mark (3:27): *But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man; then indeed he may plunder his house*. What on earth, and about whom was Jesus talking here, you may ask? Well, he was talking about himself,

and his mission throughout Galilee. With every healing and exorcism he was binding the strong man, Satan. And now at the gates of Jerusalem, it was time to find a way in to begin plundering the house where evil had taken hold. His first stop would be the Temple. But Jesus the plunderer? His words, not mine. Whatever it takes, he means to get inside.

Today is Palm Sunday. Here he comes again. Most of the time we in the church tend to think of ourselves as fellow marchers with Jesus on his mission to bring peace and reconciliation to the earth. I would say that for fifty-one weeks of the year, the metaphor works. Yesterday, for example, the metaphor worked as it applied to the noble aims of the March for Life. So yes, for fifty-one weeks of the year, the metaphor works. Fifty-one weeks, mind you, not fifty-two. Holy Week turns the tables on us. On Palm Sunday we look up and see that Jesus is not so much walking with us, but towards us. Suddenly, Jerusalem is us. Jerusalem is the inner depths of the human heart, yours and mine. We are the heavily defended fortress that Jesus is approaching.

As Holy Week progresses, see how Jesus makes his way to the inner depths of power, to come face-to-face with Pilate and Herod and Caiaphas and Peter and Judas and even a thief on another cross. Likewise, his goal is to breach the walls of our hardened hearts, march right up to you and me, and come face-to-face with each one of us. What does he intend to plunder? What tables does he intend to tip over inside this temple of my soul? What passionate beliefs and deeply held assumptions of mine does he intend to scatter? And you: what about yours?

The imagery can be disturbing, and our understandable reaction to the approach of Jesus might be to strengthen the walls and redouble our efforts to defend them. Over the centuries various poets and prophets have wrestled with the dilemma of God's persistence. John Donne, the 17th century Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London prayed through one of his Holy Sonnets:

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurp'd town to another due,
Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end;
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain,
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

Donne seemed torn: semi-comfortable in his captivity, but he also knew that the salvation of his soul depended on God's breaking through his defenses. And so he prayed that God would continue the siege and batter his heart. As for Helen of Troy, whether or not she returned to Sparta depends on which epic poem you read, or which movie you watch. It could be that the long campaign to win her back was all for naught.

As for you and me, remember that we are God's beloved, whom God intends to reclaim. Today is Palm Sunday, and here he comes again. Today we drop our guard, open the gates, and dare shout *Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!*