

Old Testament Lesson—Psalm 118:19-29

Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it. I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

New Testament Lesson—Luke 19:28-40

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" just say this, "The Lord needs it." So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

I came across something that's occupied my attention for a while now. I learned that, for some reason, Hollywood and its celebrities have been plagued by unique and rather strange phobias for decades.

Have you heard about this? Turns out these irrational fears seem to disproportionately affect actors and other celebrities. Now, to be fair, some of them are afraid of things that frighten many others...like, the fear of heights, public speaking, enclosed spaces, darkness, large crowds, that sort of stuff.

But some, I gotta say, are just weird. And these (by the way) are widely known and well documented. Let me share a few of the more interesting ones I've come across. Did you know, for example, that Nicole Kidman has a fear of butterflies? The Church's Easter season might not be the most comfortable for her, I'd imagine...

Apparently, Matthew McConaughey is afraid of revolving doors. Personally, I think they're kind of fun! Even Alfred Hitchcock, who you might think had mastered fear in all its

forms, had a phobia of...(wait for it)...eggs! Makes sense, perhaps, for how expensive they are these days; but it kind of makes you wonder how he made it through filming *The Birds*!

But, I have to admit—the strangest one by far comes from none other than the former queen of daytime TV herself, Oprah Winfrey. The star and entrepreneur is reportedly deathly afraid of (wait for it)...chewing gum! In fact, she's completely banned gum in all its forms from her studios, film sets, magazine offices, and anywhere else she might happen to show up.

Now, let me be clear—I'm not saying this to gossip or make fun of these individuals. I do so to make the point that even the most wealthy and powerful among us may have an "Achilles heel." Even these can be overcome by fear, irrational or otherwise.

Now, in Jesus' day, the untouchably rich and powerful and feared force would have been the Roman Empire, which at its greatest extent, encompassed almost all of Europe, Northern Africa, and parts of Western Asia. During Jesus' lifetime, Jerusalem and all of Palestine was occupied by the Romans.

And tragically, in that same century, the Romans would easily crush a major Jewish uprising and destroy the Holy Temple in the process. Bottom line: you just didn't mess with the Empire. They were to be feared, not challenged. No one stood a chance...

Well, almost no one...No one except the Parthians, whose empire stretched from modern day Saudi Arabia to India. The Parthians were a consistent thorn in the Romans' side, and one of the only groups Rome had a legitimate reason to fear.

Think about it—the impenetrable Goliath, the Roman Empire...afraid. And they were right to be, because the Parthians were leaps and bounds ahead of the Romans when it came to cavalry combat—soldiers on horses. Though the Romans were renowned for their infantry and legions, they largely didn't have an answer for the Parthian machine of armored horsemen and horseman-archers.

Despite all of Rome's military might—despite their brutal reputation, the Parthians served up humiliating defeat after humiliating defeat.

The image of a powerful person atop an armored war-horse would have given pause to every Roman legionnaire. It would've made them question if they had the upper hand—if they were really in control.

Bluntly speaking: If you were trying to instill fear into the hearts of your Roman oppressors—oppressors who had taken control of your homeland and holy city, this is how you would've done it!

If you were trying to make Roman soldiers and governors shudder in their sandals, reminding them how far they were from the capital city of Rome, and virtually next door to the Parthians and all those armored horses...well then, showing up atop an intimidating steed, adorned for battle, surrounded by your zealous supporters would have made them squirm.

At the very least, it would've made them doubt, and question their capabilities.

Friends, I've given you all this historical context because I want you to see that the blueprint for Jesus was there. As he entered the holy city for that last time, the blueprint was there. He could have made them fear him—could've made them bow down if he chose.

Let's face it: With Jesus' miraculous reputation preceding him, one that included bending the weather to his will, that included healing a soldier's servant and banishing demons—all he had to do was show up atop a strong war-horse, ready for battle, and his Roman overlords might've parted like the Red Sea.

Imagine a military commander that can heal their soldier's injuries! Imagine one that could resurrect their fallen warriors?

Perhaps, then, those same Pharisees that were so concerned about Jesus' followers making a scene would've sung a different tune. *Teacher, order your disciples to stop*, they had demanded.

Truth is, though: this was the *dream* for the vast majority of God's people: that a strong, confident, military-Messiah would rise up to overthrow anyone oppressing the Jewish people.

This was the dream: that someone from King David's line would take the reins and restore David's kingdom as it was during Israel's "Golden Age—so that all Creation might bow down before God's Messiah and worship the God of Israel.

But I have to admit, it's my dream too at times. If I'm completely honest, sometimes I want a Jesus like this. Sometimes, I want a Jesus who'll come with power and set the world aright by force, who'll overthrow those that abuse their power, who'll frighten those that profit off the suffering of others, that value influence more than human lives, that benefit from corruption and preserving the way things are...

Sometimes (yes) I want a Jesus who would make those people fear the Lord and God's Messiah—shuddering at the image of Christ, the Rider atop his fierce war-horse.

But (praise God) this is not the Jesus who came. This is not the Jesus who arrives at the gates of Jerusalem, and not the kind of Messiah Jesus has come to be. It's not the example Jesus will set for those who want to follow him.

For, as he so often does, Jesus shatters our expectations. The Way of Christ, as it turns out, is *far more* radical than violence, or force, or fear.

Instead of the intimidating stallion we might expect, Jesus approaches Jerusalem for the last time on a modest colt—a young donkey that's never been ridden.

Luke tells us Jesus doesn't even mount the colt himself! He doesn't force the creature into submission, but is placed on it gently. And so, they begin to ride with ease, as if the animal is already following Jesus' example of self-sacrifice we know is coming.

Jesus arrives not as the predicted warrior-messiah, but as the promised suffering servant—a messiah marked by humility and sacrificial love, not the surrender and subjugation of his opponents.

You see: the Way of Christ and the revolution that begins at Jerusalem's gates is so audacious because it claims that the untouchable powers that be are no match for a love so deep that it lays down its life.

The Way of Christ is so radical because it demonstrates that peace isn't built on fear or an iron fist, but on the steadfast love of our enemies. It's built on the forgiveness of our oppressors, and on the amazing grace given to those who we passionately feel don't deserve it.

The sad part about Luke's story is that Jesus' disciples seem to get it—at least at first. They seem to understand the kind of messiah Jesus has come to be. They welcome him with joy, saying, "*Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!*"

There it is, right there! Peace! Praise God, they get it! But do they, really? Do we?

I don't think we do. Because if we did, we wouldn't be so comfortable with the status quo. And we know that many of those same people laying down their cloaks to welcome Christ will demand his crucifixion in a few days' time.

They'll change their minds and demand things remain as they are. After all, that world is comfortable to them and to us. That world doesn't require any risk or sacrifice on our part.

Friends: We change our minds and refuse the peace Christ brings because, at the end of the day, people *should* get what they deserve, right? Those in the wrong *should* get what's

coming to them, right? Don't we want to see the corrupt and morally bankrupt humiliated, brought low, and stripped of all dignity—to reap all that misery they've sown?

I'm convinced: We don't want the world turned upside-down. We don't want every valley filled and every hill made low, because it means we'd have to follow the suffering servant clopping along the road and assume the risk that comes with it. It means we'd have to participate in building up God's Kingdom of peace. It means we can no longer tolerate the evils of Empire, or entertain the “small” injustices that benefit us.

Let's admit it: Sometimes, we want a Jesus who'll do all the work for us, who will implement peace for us, who doesn't require us to follow him into unfamiliar places. We'd rather follow at a comfortable distance and leave the cross-carrying for Jesus alone. But that is not the gospel. It just isn't. Let me lay out the gospel's challenge for you and for me...

We can't stop at just welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem. We have to do more than lay down our cloaks and wave our palms, secretly hoping that maybe that's the end of the story for us—that Jesus will simply take it from here.

But (praise God!) that's *not* the end of the story for us! We are called to join Christ and his cause for justice wherever it leads. We're meant to march alongside him. So, for God's sake, let's move *into* the procession. Let's get off the sidelines.

Parades are nice, yes, but parades celebrate the accomplishment of something great—a job well done. And we're just getting started. From where I'm standing, we've got a lot of peacemaking to do. We've got a lot of bridges to build, grudges to overcome, and tables to overturn. Don't let the stones speak for you.

So...Where are you going for Lent? My hope and prayer is that it's wherever he's going—wherever that donkey's headed.

Palm branches down. Let's get moving—following. Don't let him get too far ahead.
Amen.