“The Donkey King”

Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
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Every year since 1946, the Town of Vienna has sponsored a Halloween parade. It’s a two-hour extravaganza, featuring more than a hundred entries and 35,000 spectators. It’s so momentous that even part of Route 123 closes down for the event. It’s the one night of the year when Vienna goes small town. Anybody who wants to walk in a parade is welcome. There are all ages of kids in costumes, clowns, politicians and high school marching bands. The Redskins band marched last year; if, in fact, we can still call them that. In 2012, the Presidents, the mascots of the Washington Nationals, made an appearance. I still think it was a mistake for Teddy Roosevelt to win a race, breaking his 525 game losing streak, but that’s a story for another day.

Everybody loves a parade. Today’s story features an impromptu parade. People wave palm branches and lay their coats on the road; a sort of poor man’s red carpet treatment. Pilgrims break into song and the atmosphere suddenly becomes electric with messianic expectation.

Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem when Jesus sends two of his disciples ahead to fetch a donkey that has never been ridden. If anybody asks them what they are doing, Jesus tells them to simply say, “The Lord has need of it.”

The disciples do as instructed. They locate this donkey that has never been ridden. As they untie the donkey, sure enough the owner protests: “Hey, where are you going with my donkey?” The disciples give the prearranged words, “the Lord has need of it,” and everything in our story resumes as planned.

Jesus’ disciples must be thinking either Jesus has made prior arrangements with somebody or he possesses uncanny insight into the future. Jesus is able to see into the future about any number of things. Jesus anticipates the Passover Meal, called the Last Supper, that is shared in the Upper Room. He predicts Judas’ betrayal, Peter’s threefold denial and his disciples’ wholesale desertion. Jesus displays uncanny foresight into all sorts of events yet to take place.
As Jesus rides into Jerusalem, the disciples and the crowd break into singing the Hallel Psalms. These praise songs are sung by pilgrims on their way to celebrate the Passover: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” They also sing, “Glory to God in the highest and peace in heaven,” which are nearly the same words the angels sang at Jesus’ birth.

This story is the only recorded instance in the gospels in which Jesus rides instead of walks. He walks the 100-mile trek from the Sea of Galilee to Jerusalem yet when he nears the holy city he elects to ride a borrowed donkey. There must be some significance to riding a donkey into town.

You can bet when Pilate and his cronies ride into town, they won’t be riding a mule. They will be mounted on a majestic war horse with squadrons of soldiers accompanying them. Horses are symbols of strength and valor. These so-called beasts of burden epitomize human labor and humility.

All four gospels tell this story. In Matthew’s parallel account of this story, he interprets this donkey-riding event as fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah: “This takes place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, ‘Lo, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, the foal of a donkey’” (Matthew 21:5 quoting Zechariah 9:9). Just for the record, a donkey in those days that has never been ridden was reserved for sacred purposes.

The Pharisees in the crowd think Jesus ought to say something to silence the fervor of his disciples. “Teacher,” they tell him, “rebuke your disciples” (19:39). Tell your disciples to cease and desist. But Jesus does just the reverse. He counters, “If they keep quiet, these very stones will cry out” (19:40).

Jesus seems to go out of his way earlier in his ministry to avoid public pronouncements concerning his identity. So, the question I’ve been wrestling with this week is why does he resist public pronouncements of
his own identity when here he accepts and even encourages their recognition of his messianic mission?

Let me illustrate the point. Earlier in Luke’s gospel, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” (Luke 9:18). His disciples play back to Jesus some of the larger than life figures of Biblical history. Some say you are Elijah come back to earth or a reincarnated version of John the Baptist. But then Jesus intensifies and personalizes his question, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter, impetuous Peter, who is prone to say most anything, this time nails it, “You are the Messiah.” What Jesus says next is rather jarring: “He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone [about him]” (9:21).

Jesus’ order for them to keep silent doesn’t seem to square with Jesus no-holds-barred, tell-the-truth-at-all-costs approach to life. Why does he order his disciples to remain silent about his identity while here he throws caution to the wind and encourages their open expression of adulation for his messianic mission?

I suspect Jesus is cautious earlier in his ministry about his identity so as not to be too closely aligned with political and nationalistic agendas. There are plenty of people who want the Messiah to deliver Israel from Roman occupation. But as Jesus nears Jerusalem and knows his days are numbered, he recognizes that his time has come. His moment has arrived. It’s time to announce unambiguously that he is the Messiah.

Maybe you’ve heard the expression “timing is everything.” Being in the right place at the right time is crucial to life. Timing is everything in sports. Whether or not you make contact with a ball is a matter of timing. Timing is everything in farming. A farmer needs to know when it’s time to plant and when it’s time to harvest. Timing is everything in photography. The key to taking good pictures is being in the right place at just the right time with your camera in hand.

Timing is everything. I have found that it’s generally not a good idea to crack a joke when your spouse is really angry about something. I wouldn’t
advise asking for a raise if your company is losing revenue. Timing is everything.

Buck O’Neil played baseball in the old Negro Leagues. He was an accomplished first baseman and later manager of the fabled Kansas City Monarchs, one of the most successful teams during the heyday of the Negro Leagues.

O’Neil attended, some years ago, a reunion of players who competed during this era. He was asked by a reporter about whether he had any regrets. After all, O’Neil played before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball. I admire O’Neil’s gracious response. “Waste no tears for me,” he said. “I didn’t come along early. I was right on time. I don’t have a bitter story. I truly believe I have been blessed.” Buck O’Neil’s autobiography is appropriately titled, *I Was Right On Time*.

When Jesus rides into Jerusalem, he is right on time. He chooses this precise moment to announce his messianic mission.

Jesus doesn’t come off in this passage as some hapless victim of events taking place outside his control. He chooses this precise moment to ride into Jerusalem, to announce his mission and to go to the cross. Jesus once told his detractors, “No one takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to lay my life down and take it up again” (John 10:18).

The ancient Greeks had two words for time. The most common word for time in Scripture is *chronos*. We derive our English word chronology from this Greek word. *Chronos* is linear, sequential time. It’s the kind of time some of you are subtly keeping track of right now on your watches or cellphones.

There’s another Greek word for time called *kairos* time. *Kairos* represents a decisive moment in time. *Kairos* is the right or most opportune time. It’s a moment in time when something special takes place. When Paul writes that Jesus came in “the fullness of time,” he is speaking about *kairos* time (Galatians 4:4-5). At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus announced, “The [kairos] time has come. The kingdom of God is at hand.
Repent and believe the gospel” Mark 1:15). Jesus declares that his coming represents a *kairos* moment in human history.

There are occasions when we are living in *chronos* time, when suddenly time shifts to another dimension and we experience a *kairos* moment. There are decisive moments in life when *chronos* time becomes a *kairos* moment. Incidentally, events like baptism can be a *kairos* moment in family life.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? I’m hoping and praying this sermon becomes a *kairos* moment for you. Today might be the right time for you to open your life to Jesus Christ. It might be the day when you decide once and for all to become one of his followers. It may be the opportune time to let go of some bitterness you’ve been carrying around for years. It could be the occasion when you let go of long-held anger or resentment. Today could become a *kairos* moment in your life.