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March 25, 2018 – Palm/Passion Sunday

**“A Donkey and A Disciple”**  
Isaiah 50:4-9a, Mark 11:1-11

As I have grown older... yes, I have to admit, I AM getting more ‘elderly’...I have begrudgingly come to appreciate the importance of something whose **necessity** I have **denied** in the past. That which has **helped me** to **see more clearly** what lies **before me**. Something that my **pride** would cause me to **deny** its **value**,but has allowed me to **focus** on the **issues** at hand. No, not Ritalin or Adderal. That aid to my vision would be, of course, my GLASSES. That ‘lens’ through which blurry words are brought into a **sharper focus**, providing a more **distinct** image... so that I might better **comprehend** what is in front of me. Being able to SEE things more clearly can certainly change one’s perspective on life.

It is just such a need for clarity of vision in our physical bodies that makes the study of Scripture so important in our spiritual lives. ... AND in our everyday lives. We can deny the necessity of studying God’s word... we can minimize its value, allowing our pride to inflate our own abilities to handle life’s challenges. But the fact of the matter is that as we look at our lives through the eyes of God, And God’s ‘mouthpieces,’ we can see things in whole new perspectives.

It is this importance of looking at our lives through God’s Word that in large part has influenced me to be a “lectionary preacher.” This discipline calls me to look at the same set of Scriptures once every three years. And each time that I do, I will look at those passages with a different perspective...through a different ‘lens.’ And hopefully, by the power of God’s Spirit, I will be offered new insights that I did NOT ‘see’ 3 years before... or 6... or 9... well, you get the drift.

Today’s lectionary selections from the O.T. and Gospel... particularly the Mark passage... are likely quite familiar to you all. If I were to ask you what the ‘theme’ is for each one... ‘What’s it all about, Presbys?’... you all could probably agree on the core themes. (Wait... Presbys AGREE?!) OK, we’ll start with the easy one: the Mark passage. It describes what is commonly referred to as... **“The Triumphal Entry.”** Of WHOM? Duh.. JESUS, of course. Just checking to see if you’re paying attention.

Then, there's the reading from Isaiah. With its language of **"teacher" ... "word" ... "insult" ... "disgraced" ... "not turn(ing) backward" ... "I gave my back to those who struck me" ...** WHO might we readily associate this passage with? Yes, that same JESUS. (Never mind that it was written some 700 years 'B.C.!) Between this section being entitled "The Servant's Humiliation and Vindication" (like 'crucifixion and resurrection')... and Jesus referring to himself as the One who **"came not to be served, but to serve"**... this has GOT to be about the promised Messiah, RIGHT!?

For today's consideration, however, I'd like us to look at these from a different vantage point... another 'angle.' Instead of the 'servant' in the O.T. verse being **Jesus**, let us consider it to be the author: that devoted follower of God, **Isaiah**. And in the Mark passage, instead of looking at these words from our Lord's viewpoint... or from his two emissaries, or from the crowd... I really want you to stretch your 'perspective.' I'm going to challenge you to experience this event through the eyes of that **"colt."** Yes, that young little 'beast of burden' that would become Jesus' 'mode of transportation.' May our faith indeed come into **sharper focus** as we seek to better **comprehend** that faith with the help of **"A Donkey and a Disciple."**

We start with the 'Disciple,' Isaiah. Now it may sound strange to hear this word associated with the great Prophet, but when you consider that **"disciple"** means... **"one who accepts and assists in spreading the beliefs of another; a convinced follower"** ... I think that the title works pretty well. He most certainly 'accepted' the role that God had placed on his heart to warn His Chosen people of the punishment that would come with disobedience... and embraced his calling to 'spread belief' in the One True God of Israel. As much as Isaiah is associated with **judgment**, he is also very much about **hope**. From the promise that **"those who wait (HOPE) on the Lord will renew their strength"** (Isaiah 40:31) to **"the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."** (Isaiah 9:2) this 'convinced follower' of God sought for his people to be **'prepared for the worst,'** while lifting up on their behalf **'prayers for the best.'**

The author of this 50<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Isaiah (there is some disagreement on some chapters' authorship) takes upon himself the role of "servant." A role that entails both "Humiliation" and "Vindication" ... from 'shame' to 'exaltation.' The Scripture tells of how this 'servant' is blessed

with much ability: the eloquence of a **teacher**... the compassion of a **healer**... the wisdom of a **listener**. This same servant also is cursed with much persecution: a back to be **struck**... a beard to be **pulled out**... a face to be **insulted** and **spat upon**. The lot of a 'disciple/prophet' like Isaiah was no easy one. It comes as no surprise that several ancient traditions suggest that Isaiah died a martyr's violent death. No worse, of course, than the brutal execution of the One whom Isaiah would foreshadow, Jesus the Christ. It should also not be surprising that this book of Isaiah is quoted or alluded to in the N.T. more than ANY other book of the Hebrew Scriptures, except perhaps Psalms.

Because of his links with the Messiah of which he foretold... none-the-least of which is the status of a **servant**... we who also share in 'discipleship' with Christ should consider the examples Isaiah gave for US to live by. As we have done on previous occasions in the New Testament, we would do well to insert our own names into this 'servant's job description':

***"The Lord God has given me (\_\_\_) the tongue of a teacher...***

***That I (\_\_\_) may know how to sustain the weary with a word.***

***The Lord God has opened my ear, and I (\_\_\_) was not rebellious.***

***I (\_\_\_) did not turn back... I (\_\_\_) did not hide my face from insult"***

HOW? How is it that we, in the face of hardship and persecution, will NOT waver, or turn back; will NOT turn away from someone who insults us; or WILL be given the wisdom to teach others, or the boldness to sustain the weary with a word? By the conviction that this disciple Isaiah closes with:

***"The Lord God helps me; therefore I have **not** been **disgraced**;***

***...I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near."*** (Isaiah 50:7-8)

Despite the fact that we are separated by nearly 3000 years, we can yet relate to Isaiah simply on the basis of our shared **humanity**. Which brings us to our second 'different perspective'. WAY different. Rather 'in-human.' You might consider us moving, in the words of Founding Father Thomas Paine, "*From the **sublime** to the **ridiculous**."* BUT, if you would bear with me just a few minutes, you *might* just gain a new 'perspective' on this story from the 'perspective' of a simple little **donkey**.

The first thing we learn about this young 'colt' is that it "***has never been ridden***." It has

never been **trained**, never had any **guidance**, never had to bear any **burdens**. A 'blank slate,' if you will. And so these two perfect strangers are going to just go up and untie this animal and lead it away. I think that qualifies as 'grand larceny!' AND, should someone question their action, the two 'donkey pilferers' are simply say that ***"The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately."*** 'WHAT 'Lord?' And you'll 'bring it right back?' SURE you will...'

And then this young colt **goes off willingly** with these two complete strangers. I guess the animal had yet to be educated about 'stranger danger!' So they go and put *another* stranger on his back, who is almost **as big as he is!** And just about the time this little 'beast of burden' is getting wore out from his 'payload,' they pull into this big city, with all these people going crazy, shouting at him, and waving these big green branches at him. 'Haven't I seen these used to **whip** some of my older relatives, to get them to move faster? But they seem to be pretty **happy** with me, and whoever this is on my back. They've even spread out the 'burlap carpet' for us. You know, this is actually pretty cool! Maybe I'll get to 'hang' with this popular guy a little while longer...'

Pretty ridiculous, right? No, I'm not pretending to really know what thought processes (if any) go through a young donkey's mind. But, if we engage those somewhat fertile imaginations just a bit, perhaps it's not TOO big a stretch to see how WE might learn something from that simple animal in how we are to interact with our Lord.

We have certainly been 'trained' in the ways of the world... in some ways, 'ridden'... as in 'ridden hard and put up wet.' But in following Jesus, we need to be more of a 'blank slate,' open to new ideas, new ways of doing things. To receive 'guidance' from the most pure form of wisdom and knowledge – our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But to do so, we must be willing to be 'led.' Sometimes by what might seem to be 'perfect strangers.' (So, would that make us 'IM-perfect strangers?')

We must be open to being called to serve Christ. Why? Because, just as the Lord had need of the donkey, ***"the Lord needs us."*** God needs us to carry the burden of Christ that others either don't know or have turned away from. And bring Christ to the people. Even though carrying Christ is NOT an easy burden to bear...

As we present our Lord Christ to others, some will be very happy to hear about Him.

Others not-so-much. And even if they are, it won't take long before some will turn their joy into ridicule... their 'palms' into 'whips.' So, we should enjoy such adulation while it lasts. As those 'cheers' turn to 'jeers,' we must not forget: those who 'hang' with Jesus may be called to 'hang' with Jesus...

As you and I, in this most sacred 'roller coaster' of faith known as 'Holy Week,' ponder just what it means to be a follower of Christ... to 'hang with Jesus' ... may we continue to be open to new perspectives on our faith. Perhaps through the eyes of an Old Testament prophet... whose faith points us to the person of Christ just as surely as a New Testament disciple. Perhaps through the whimsical eyes of a young donkey, who reminds us that the 'burden of proof' of faith in Christ is on OUR backs. May we be convinced anew this week of the truth:

***"The Lord God helps me. I know that I shall not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near. ...Blessed be the name of the Lord."*** And may ALL God's children say, 'AMEN!'