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“Unstoppable Praise” GPPC 4-14-19
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29, Luke 19:28-40

When my older son, Michael, was in his late teens and early twenties, he used to love to watch an MTV series called “Pimp My Ride.” Anybody remember that TV series? Yeah, we’re going there today.

Hosted by the rapper known as Xzibit and set in Southern California, here’s how the show worked. A poor long-suffering driver would present his or her dilapidated motor vehicle to the generous people of MTV and convince them that vast improvements in that vehicle’s condition were warranted. The rapper Xzibit would inspect the vehicle, make fun of it as much as possible, and then finally agree to a total makeover of it. (You’ll notice basically this is the same format used for those house makeover shows on HGTV, but now I’ve gone to meddling.)

At any rate, the big-hearted people of MTV would take the decrepit vehicle away to a famous specialty body shop where we watched its transformation. And then after several days MTV producers

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and Xzibit would return it to the owner with a huge unveiling celebration. Typically, not only did the car now have almost completely new components, engine, stereo, tires, and paintjob, it also featured a theme from the recipient's life. For example, if you were a bowler, a bowling ball spinner in the trunk. A badminton player with a badminton net on the back of the car. A surfer with a clothes dryer in the car. And so on. It was fun and hilarious, and in the end people ended up with a ride fit for a king or queen.

Luke says Jesus is going up to Jerusalem. And when he gets near the villages of Bethphage and Bethany, he sends two of his disciples to get him a ride. And here's where things are kind of odd. There's a lot of detail about this ride. Jesus does not merely say, "Hey, guys. Just go get me a horse." No. His instructions are elaborate.

And, I'd never noticed this before, but out of the twelve verses we read this morning, eight whole verses are about how to get the ride, the qualifications of the correct ride (a never ridden colt not a war stallion), what to do if the owner asks about the ride ("just say the Lord needs it"), how they actually find the ride (right where Jesus predicts), what

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happens when they do indeed find the ride (the verbal exchange Jesus foretold), how they bring the ride to Jesus, how they get it ready by throwing their cloaks on it, and then finally how they set Jesus on the ride, and how he rides along with people spreading their cloaks on the road (sort of like rolling out the red carpet). Eight out of twelve verses. Seriously!

Why all this emphasis on the ride?

Because this is a ride fit for a king. Luke wants us to see that Jesus is the king, the sovereign sent by God, and God is quietly, mysteriously involved all along. Jesus knows where the colt will be, that it will not have been ridden before. He knows the disciples who go to get the colt will be confronted about it, but because he is king, with all the king's prerogatives, his followers will be allowed to take it. And finally, after they've thrown their cloaks on top of the colt, the disciples set Jesus aboard like royalty, because he *is* royalty.

Jesus *is* king. Yet he's a different sort of king. He is a bewildering sovereign, because we're used to ordinary rulers or even elected representatives who range from somewhat caring and benevolent to

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merciless egomaniacs whose appetite for power, cruelty, and affirmation are insatiable. We're used to those people.

But Jesus confuses us. He lives his entire life on the earth feeding the hungry and healing the sick. Speaking up for the weakest people in the society. Bringing down the arrogant and abusive. Not only hanging around with his disciples but also eating with prostitutes, tax collectors, and other folks who are not candidates for "the moral person of the year" award. Forgiving the sins of all who simply say they're sorry. Coming into Jerusalem on a colt, not a war stallion. And he does it all without seeking self-recognition or self-advantage.

So Jesus really disturbs our expectations of sovereignty. And he sets the highest example for us to follow. He comes to Jerusalem not with arrogance and aggression but with humility and gentleness.

You and I are part of a U.S. culture that says our highest loyalty is to be customers, enticed to buy stuff, "It's all about *you*. What do *you* want?" But instead humility and gentleness are what we learn in church. Sunday after Sunday we are reminded of our highest loyalty--you and I are disciples, followers of Jesus. And we are imperfect. We're sinners.

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We're not superstars. We're not the center of the universe. We're ordinary people hoping to serve God with the short amount of time we have on the earth.

And Sunday after Sunday we're taught to practice gentleness. This is not about being cowardly. And it's not about being passive or pretending that anything goes. But it's about trying to do what is right, and doing so without being nasty about it. It's about caring for people who are in trouble, trying to listen, sharing what we have, working for the common good, and speaking the truth in love.

Humility and gentleness are to mark our personal lives and our life as a congregation. And that's why as Christians we are also always trying to make our government, our representatives, our policies, more humane not more aggressive.

So we speak to our elected representatives and call for border policies that are as humble and gentle as possible. We don't ask for open borders, but we ask if there are more constructive ways to respond to suffering people who're fleeing oppression in their own countries. As one writer suggests some possibilities include, "a massive, multifaceted

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approach that includes big investments in improving conditions in the origin countries...regional cooperation; major resources to unclog and streamline courts; and even involvement by the United Nations and improved refugee infrastructure in the region.” (Greg Sargent writing in *The Washington Post*, April 11, 2019) The issues are complicated and call for our careful reflection and deep love.

And, through Bread for the World, we write letters to our elected representatives about public funding for hunger relief, because we believe it’s important for God’s children, no matter what age, to be able to have enough nutritious food to eat.

We don’t imagine we’re going to bring in the kingdom of God in all its fullness, but we are trying to do our small part as followers of Christ who comes to Jerusalem not as a conquering warrior but as the humble, gentle, servant king.

One last thing. Luke says Jesus approaches Jerusalem, and the whole multitude of the disciples begins to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they’ve seen. They say,

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“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, And glory in the highest heaven!”

The language “peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven” sounds familiar, doesn’t it? Do you remember where you have heard it before? It’s similar to the language in Luke chapter two when the angels praise God for the birth of Jesus. But now it’s not just the angels doing the praising; it’s the disciples.

And here’s where I learned something else new this week. A scholar says, “Christ is praised and hailed as king by his followers, says Luke, and not by the general public. And this is not the group, says Luke, which later called for Jesus’ crucifixion. To be sure, Jesus’ followers did not understand him or the nature of his messiahship, but neither are they persons who sing praise and scream death within the same week.” (Fred B. Craddock, in *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year C, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, 70.*)

You probably already knew that, but in my mind I tended to lump everybody together as fickle—yelling praise for Jesus in one minute and screaming for his crucifixion in the next. And that’s probably not so.

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You see the disciples of Jesus don't completely understand who he is, but they do know he is "the king who comes in the name of the Lord." They don't utterly grasp who Jesus is, but they've seen and experienced his healing, nurturing, forgiving, correcting love in their lives. So they throw a parade, a procession for him, the humble, gentle servant king. And though it's not identified as such, I think they actually have a worship service. The procession is just the first part of the worship service. The second part is when the people shout praise to God for sending Jesus.

Some of the Pharisees don't like it and they tell Jesus to tell his disciples to stop. But Jesus answers (the third part of the worship service), "No. I'm telling you. If they were silent, the stones would shout out." If they were silent, even creation itself would shout out Christ's Lordship. The news is unstoppable.

You and I are descendants of those first disciples, you know. We certainly do not completely understand who Jesus was and is. And we definitely do not follow him perfectly. But we're also not going to be lined up screaming for his crucifixion on Good Friday either.

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Instead, we're going to be gathered in worship, as we are on Sundays, to sing praise to God, to give thanks to God for the gift of Jesus, for the gift of his life and our lives and for the life of this world and the life of the world to come. We're going to be gathered to enjoy being with each other in this family of faith, to welcome others into the family, to support each other and challenge each other, and most of all to join with the voice of all creation to sing, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!"

After all, we're disciples. And that's what we disciples do with our lips and our lives. We offer worship and praise. Unstoppable praise.

Amen. ©Jeff Paschal