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Bridge Street United Church  
March 24, 2024  
Rev. Dr. John H. Young  
Readings: Philippians 2:5-11; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Mark 11:1-11

### Journeying Through Lent: Trust

Every time I read the Palm Sunday story in any one of Matthew's, Mark's, or Luke's Gospel, I always find myself struck by the opening part of the story. It is the part where Jesus says to his disciples: Go into the village up ahead. You will see a colt tied up there, a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it to me. If anyone asks you what you are doing, just say, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately." His disciples do what he has asked. They untie a colt that they have found "tied near a door outside in the street. Some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it."

Let me transport this story into the present. I drive a 2020 Subaru Crosstrek, khaki grey the specs indicated when I bought it new, though it looks blue to me. It is a six-speed standard, something I particularly prize as I love to drive a car with a manual transmission, and cars with a manual transmission are hard to get these days. This car has just over sixty-four thousand kilometres, and it is in excellent shape. I work hard to keep it that way, do all the required maintenance, look after the body, and so on. I have that special affection for my car that some other people, mostly men, exhibit. But I want to be clear. My car is not as valuable a commodity as an unriden colt would have been to a first century resident of Palestine. That said, can you guess what my reaction would be if several of you came to my office, without advance warning,

and said: “We’ve come to pick up your car, for the Lord has need of it. We won’t need it for too long, and we’ll bring it back as soon as we are done with it. Please give us the keys?” Now do you think I am likely to hand over the keys? Guess! Maybe I would, for someone I knew well, though I would first be checking to ensure that the person knew how to drive a standard. But there would be reluctance written all over my face, even if I did not say anything.

But in this story, the bystanders, at least, allow Jesus’ disciples to take this unriden colt with simply the words “The Lord needs it and will send it back immediately.” What are we to make of it? Some commentators on Mark’s Gospel suggest that Jesus had “pre-arranged” for the colt to be available, and that is why the bystanders let it go. Maybe. But that explanation seems to me more than a little convenient as a way to explain something that is at least highly unusual. A relatively careful reading of the text suggests, at least to me, that such an explanation is implausible. After all, it was “some of the bystanders” who raised questions when the disciples were untying the colt, according to Mark’s account. If Jesus had pre-arranged a borrowing of this unriden colt, surely the unknown owner would have said something to some of the folk in the street. One would assume that at least some of the bystanders would have known about the arrangement and therefore not questioned these two disciples in the way they did. And there is certainly no evidence in the details of the story, as we have it, that the bystanders knew these disciples.

I think that the story is a remarkable instance of trust. The bystanders, who presumably know the owner of this unriden colt, a valuable animal in that day, accept that “the Lord” has need of the colt and that the colt will be returned to them. I am not sure I would have been so trusting. In fact, I know I would not have been.

But there is trust elsewhere in this story, less directly obvious, perhaps, but there as well. In this story at the beginning of Mark, chapter 11, we hear of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. But the entry into Jerusalem is the culmination of a journey. In the previous chapter, toward the end of it, in fact, we read that Jesus and his disciples "were on the road, going up to Jerusalem." This is where we learn that Jesus is on this final journey to Jerusalem, the journey that will be completed when he enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. That passage continues: "Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid" [Mark 10:32]. "Those who followed were afraid." Not much wonder. Jesus has already told them that he will suffer and die. In fact, he will take the twelve disciples, his closest followers, aside yet one more time and tell them yet again that he will be killed and after three days rise again.

We tend to read the Palm Sunday story as a triumphal entry, and in the other three gospels there are good reasons to do that. But Mark is more subdued in his account. It is certainly the case that, despite Jesus' words, his disciples do not understand what he is trying to tell them, do not understand how this journey will end. Or, they certainly do not, at this point in time, have anything like a full picture. But their fear indicates they certainly understood that there was danger in being a follower of Jesus. It may have been some sense of the opposition Jesus faced; certainly they would not have been naïve about how the Romans would have regarded any threat to their rule. They were afraid.

But they have enough trust in Jesus to follow his instructions about getting the colt, even though they knew that if Jesus rode into Jerusalem on such a colt he was making a statement. In the ancient world, a monarch or an emperor riding a colt was signalling a desire to enter a city in peace; by way of contrast, those who conquered entered on a horse or in a chariot. But that is still a claim, and a powerful one, a claim of authority. In an authoritarian country, or an

authoritarian culture, claims of by those who are not in authority are not well regarded by those who are. Think about contemporary Russia if you want to see an example. Jesus had to know that. And so did his followers. They were afraid. But they trusted. They trusted this one they followed, trusted enough to follow him into Jerusalem that day. And they trusted the God Jesus was revealing to them.

Mark's Gospel is the earliest of the four gospels we have in the New Testament to be written. It was probably written in the late 60s or very early 70s of the first century of the Common Era. In other words, it comes a generation or a little more after Jesus' death. It was almost certainly written for a small Christian community, a community in the first generation of its existence, a community still learning about Jesus, a community still figuring out what following would mean. Like John's Gospel, the author writes to help this community understand who Jesus was. This community would have needed strengthening in a world where most people would be unaware of this new religious tradition and where those who were, apart from the members of the community itself, would have been either ambivalent to it or mildly hostile. Recognizing who Jesus was, becoming more certain and secure in that knowledge, would have been important to that community. That community, like Jesus' disciples, needed to learn to trust.

We gather as those who would also follow Jesus. Doing so requires a sense of trust from us, also, even as it did for Jesus' initial followers, and for the bystanders, and for the owner of the colt who sits somewhere in the background of this story.

I do need to say something about trust. There is a difference between trust and recklessness. In one of Jesus' temptations, the devil took him to the pinnacle of the temple and urged him to throw himself down, saying that God would send angels to rescue him. Jesus responded by saying that one should not put God to the test. There have been Christians down

through the centuries who have taken what most of us would regard as foolish risks, Their argument for doing so has been that they trust God to ensure their well-being. I think, for example, of churches, mostly in the Appalachian Mountains in Kentucky, Tennessee, and several of the surrounding states, that practise snake-handling as a part of their religious exercises. The snakes they use are, of course, poisonous ones. The pastors handle the snakes as do some other members of the congregation. They believe that if they have sufficient faith either they will not be bitten or, if bitten, God will protect them so that they will not die. They do lose a few members. Of course that can always be explained as a lack of trust, or a lack of faith, using faith here as a synonym for trust.

I shall hazard a guess that probably none of us here feel tempted to that particular manifestation of Christianity. But I use it as an illustration of my point that having trust is not an invitation to be reckless. Likewise, to have trust does not mean that we should allow others to use us or to abuse us. That misuse may be something to which those of us here are more susceptible, and it is a more understandable one, especially when we want genuinely to be helpful to others. To have faith in God, to be a follower of Jesus, may appear to others to be foolish, or to do things that do not make sense, at least that do not make sense in the general practices and thinking of our society. However, having trust is not to be equated with being reckless.

To trust God means to be obedient to God and to act in accord with God's will, as best we can discern that. It is to seek to serve, humbly, steadily. We will make mistakes. But when we trust, and seek to be followers of Jesus, God is there.

We stand at the beginning of Holy Week. We remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and also the events of the week, an entry and events in which Jesus put his trust in God. As followers,

we are called to do the same thing, not always knowing where following faithfully will lead us but knowing that God will be with us in that journey, knowing that, as the apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Romans, that there is absolutely nothing that can separate us from God's love.

And to the God who made us, to the one through whom we have seen that God most fully revealed, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of that God with us now and with us always, be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.

### **Resources**

Bartlett, David L. and Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

Schock, Yvette. "March 17: Liturgy of the Palms" *The Christian Century*, March 2024, p. 27.