

“Committing”  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
Palm Sunday  
Edina Morningside Community Church; April 5, 2020

**Debby Irving**, from *Waking Up White*, pg. 249

*Self-examination and the courage to admit to bias and unhelpful inherited behaviors may be our greatest tools for change. Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable enough to expose our ignorance and insecurities takes courage. And love. I believe the most loving thing a person, or a group of people, can do for another is to examine the ways in which their own insecurities and assumptions interfere with others' ability to thrive. Please join me in opening your heart and mind to the possibility that you--yes, even well-intentioned you--have room to change and grow, so that you can work with people of all colors and ethnicities to co-create communities that can unite, strengthen, and prosper.*

**Mark 11:1-11**

*When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, 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. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,*

*“Hosanna!*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*

*Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!*

*Hosanna in the highest heaven!”*

*Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.*

The author E.L. Doctorow has described his craft in this way. “Writing,” he says, “is like driving at night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.” The same can be said of life itself. We don’t always know where the road will take us. It’s like Highway 1 along the Pacific Coast in California—weaving and turning around sharp corners, slipping through unexpected tunnels, and then opening suddenly into a breathtaking vista of the wide-open sky. It comes in bits and pieces, one stretch at a time. We can’t take in the whole journey, with the best of headlights, or even in the daytime. If we could see everything instantly, we might know what parts of the trip hold the greatest consequence. What chance meeting will change life forever, and which will be just a blip in passing? Where should we be careful, lest a careless detour lead to many lost hours before a U-turn? But we can’t know these things because we can’t see the whole trip at once. Only looking back can we recognize what’s of the most importance.

Jesus surely had a stronger sense than most of the arc his own journey would make. Yet his incarnate, divine life plays out like ours: step by step. We remember those steps throughout this Holy Week: Sunday’s joyful procession, followed by threatening encounters in Jerusalem, Thursday’s last supper, betrayal, arrest and desertion, Friday’s trials, crucifixion, death and burial, before Easter’s rejoicing. Looking back now with knowledge of the full journey, we can see the everyday moments and overlooked figures that hold eternal significance. Consider just one today: the colt ridden by Jesus.

Jesus begins his Jerusalem journey by sending disciples to go ahead with one request. “Bring me an unriden colt that you’ll find tied inside that village just ahead.” We might wonder how Jesus knew where the animal was, what the reactions might be in those who saw the cold untied, or if Jesus had arranged such details in advance. But the poet Mary Oliver calls our attention to the animal itself, a donkey in other gospels. She writes:

On the outskirts of Jerusalem  
the donkey waited.  
Not especially brave, or filled with understanding,  
he stood and waited.

*How horses, turned out into the meadow,  
leap with delight!  
How doves, released from their cages,  
clatter away, splashed with sunlight.*

But the donkey, tied to a tree as usual, waited.  
Then he let himself be led away.  
Then he let the stranger mount.

Never had he seen such crowds!  
And I wonder if he at all imagined what was to happen.  
Still, he was what he had always been: small, dark, obedient...<sup>1</sup>

Mary Oliver captures well the ordinariness of this one life. He is no leaping horse or flashy dove—the colt is a beast of burden who spends much of his existence simply waiting. Yet it is to such everydayness that God incarnate comes, when Jesus enlists him in eternal service. When will our ordinary and obedient lives, seemingly spent in endless waiting for whatever is just around the bend, suddenly manifest the eternal light shining through? Can we recognize when transcendence calls for us now—in morning sunlight, a child’s “Hello”, a smile from a stranger, the smell of baking bread, or any shimmery moment that carries gratitude down the streets of the heart? One of my pastor friends, Rev. Rachel Small-Stokes, wrote to a group of us this morning: “one thing that’s coming out of this [quarantine time] is that none of us can be heroes, and yet somehow all of us can be heroes in little ways.” Though we don’t always know the full importance of each moment when it passes, we can be of better, more joyful service to God if we wait with the colt’s patience and willing expectancy. If we commit our lives to be of service to God for the realm of heaven, come to us in everyday ways here on earth.

Throughout this season of Lent, we’ve been focusing as a church on White privilege, waking up to the hidden advantages that favor those of us who are White. We’re learning to recognize the everyday, ordinary times and places where systems and habits reinforce hierarchies and dominance, and also how repeatedly speaking up in the moment, taking regular actions to resist racism, can set a different pattern in motion. The author Debby Irving challenges her White readers especially to adopt a posture of “self-examination and the courage to admit to bias and unhelpful inherited behavior”, because this self-aware attitude is among “our greatest tools for change”. We are called to commit to this way of being not just once, but over and over again each day, throughout our lives. Just because we’ve now reached the other side of Lent, and have finished reading one book on the subject, doesn’t mean we have successfully dealt with White privilege once and for all. We’ll continue resisting such idolatry throughout our life together, so I hope you’ll participate in future film screenings and activities. Whether or not those are available to

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<sup>1</sup> “The Poet Thinks about the Donkey”, *Thirst: Poems by Mary Oliver* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 44.

you, each of us must decide how we ourselves will continue working “with people of all colors and ethnicities to co-create communities that can unite, strengthen, and prosper.” In other words, how will we be colts like the one in the gospel story, available and willing at a moment’s notice to serve the realm of God, in this present moment and beyond?

Think for a moment about the communion elements we’ve asked you to gather from your home for the service this morning. No doubt they are ordinary things, pulled from the cupboard, pantry or refrigerator. Whatever you have with you for food or drink is ordinary, not thought of as especially sacred in our everyday usage. Yet in this service—with intention and prayer—everyday bread and beverage become the holy elements by which Jesus reminds disciples of our eternal connection at the table of God’s hospitality. These ordinary things are borrowed, blessed and put to use for Christ’s sake in our homes, by our faith, and for the world. Are we committing our lives as sacraments for God’s use in the same small and great ways?

Beloveds, we have no headlights to show the entire journey of our lives. Like Jesus at the start of Holy Week, we live from moment to moment, episode to episode. Yet, as E.L. Doctorow says, “you can make the whole trip that way”. The colt who carries Jesus at the beginning models for us humble and patient waiting for the next opportunity to be of service to God in the world. In the week ahead, may we know the satisfaction of committing to God’s use for good in the world, throughout the ordinary and extraordinary moments of life. May we recognize divine glory among us even now, and do something faithful for God in response. Amen.