

## “A Sweet Ride”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
April 10, 2022 – Sixth Sunday in Lent/Palm Sunday  
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Luke 19:28-40

Happy Cloak Sunday! Calling this day Cloak Sunday seems a bit funny, doesn't it? And yet, Cloak Sunday might be a good name for this holy day based on our reading from the gospel of Luke, which doesn't mention palms at all. Cloaks, however, are prominently featured in the story, being placed beneath Jesus as he sat upon a colt -- specifically identified as a colt, a youngster that had never been ridden, and not just any old donkey -- and cloaks were spread on the roadway beneath the colt as it moseyed up the Mount of Olives and then down towards Jerusalem.

Palms are missing from Luke's telling of the story, and likewise conspicuously absent but usually featured in our Palm Sunday celebrations are the shouts of hosanna! What we have instead in Luke are shouts echoing the joyous strain of the psalm that is today's first scripture lesson, with one big alteration. Usually, as pilgrims made their way up to the city of Jerusalem for the Passover, as Jesus and many of his followers were, they would sing, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD" (Psalm 118:26). But on that Cloak Sunday, they sang and shouted, "Blessed is the *king* who comes in the name of the Lord" (Luke 19:38).

My point in pointing out Luke's use of the words *cloaks*, *colt*, and *king* is that they all emphasize something very important about the unique identity of the one who rode into Jerusalem on that good day. In Luke's telling of the Triumphal Entry, the identity of Jesus as the ideal ruler of the people of Israel is revealed. Jesus rode in to town on a gentle colt, that the prophet Zechariah, hundreds of years before, preached would be the sweet ride of the long-awaited Messiah (Zechariah 9:9), the ideal king of Israel, as he entered into Jerusalem, whose people awaited one who would lead them from their brokenness and sorrow and establish a new realm in which all the people experienced, at last, the blessings of justice, peace, and prosperity. And the cloaks that he sat upon and that were spread before his sweet, gentle ride were laid before him just as people laid their cloaks before those anointed as kings of Israel in more ancient times (2 Kings 9:13). According to the gospel of Luke, Jesus rode into Jerusalem as the long-awaited king, and

with the coming of this new ruler, the establishment of a new, just realm was at hand.

But there was a conflict: Jerusalem was already part of another realm and already had an established ruler. At the time that Jesus entered Jerusalem for that Passover celebration, the city and the land all around it were part of the Roman Empire, and in that region, they were governed by Pontius Pilate, who already reigned over everything. Pilate, who, like all provincial governors, had experience commanding an army, was in charge of maintaining order. To do so in the region of Judaea, he controlled a legion of Roman soldiers that functioned as his brutal police force. He was also in charge of legal matters and functioned as the chief judge of matters in his realm. Additionally, he was in charge of extracting money from the people to pay for his government and to enrich the empire. He was also in charge of local rulers, like the Herods, who carried out many of his programs. And he had power over the religious system. The vestments that had to be worn by the temple priests in order to carry out their duties were kept under guard in a Roman fortress. The people worshipped in the temple in Jerusalem only when allowed to do so by Pilate, who rode into town from his coastal capital city Caesarea a few times a year to oversee business, including religious business, and to maintain order during raucous festival times like the Passover, during which masses of pilgrims streamed into Jerusalem from all over the region.

How different the rides must have been for Pilate and Jesus as they entered Jerusalem that Passover. One came in gently, on a sweet young donkey; the other galloping in on a mighty warhorse or upon a war chariot. This one came into town to control people, keeping peace by brute force; the other came to preach about peace between people, God, and one another and to set people free from their own destructive ways.

Today, on this Palm/Cloak Sunday, may we reject the way of proud warrior Pilate and welcome instead the way of one who comes as the humble and gentle Prince of Peace. Like his many followers who spread out their cloaks before him, welcoming him as the long-awaited Christ, let us welcome him as the one reigns over our hearts and minds. Let us sing with them, blessed is this ruler who comes in the name of the God of all creation. With them, let us offer our songs of praise,

our prayers for deliverance, and our humble acts of devotion. May we do so today, throughout this Holy Week, and on every step of the journey that lies before us. Amen.