

I

This past Wednesday, my wife Amy and I celebrated our 20th wedding anniversary. One of my favorite snapshots of that day is of the two of us leaving our wedding reception in our getaway car – a 1954 Bentley.

I'm not really a "car guy," but on special occasions, it's fun to ride in style.

II

As all of us know, on special occasions, the ride is often a big part of the overall look. The ride – the mode and style of transportation - communicates something to passersby the person or people being transported.

When a car passes down the street with a sign in the back window that reads, "Just Married," that tells us something about the people inside.

And by the same token, when a hearse comes down the road with hazard lights flashing, that, too, communicates something about the people inside. With just one glance, we often can learn quite a bit about someone by their ride.

The mode and style of transportation often communicates something to us about the person or people being transported, and that is certainly the case with the story before us this morning from the gospel according to John.

III

This winter and spring, we've been reading and preaching our way through John's gospel. We started with chapter 1, verse 1, right after Christmas,

and although we haven't gone verse by verse or even chapter by chapter, we've more or less followed the story straight through, and we left off our reading last week in chapter 19, right after the Roman governor Pontius Pilate handed Jesus over to the soldiers to be crucified.

We'll continue reading that part of the gospel narrative during our worship services this coming Thursday and Friday evenings, but this Palm Sunday morning, we're backing up the timeline a bit, by just a few days.

So in your minds' eye, imagine with me that we're rewinding the movie. We're going back in the story to just before Jesus and the disciples entered the city of Jerusalem.

When we pick up the story today, Jesus and the disciples are once again in a village called Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem, paying a visit at the home of Jesus' dear friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Earlier this spring, we read in John's gospel the story of how Lazarus had fallen ill and died, and his sisters Mary and Martha had grieved him so. When Jesus and the disciples arrived in Bethany, it was too late for Lazarus' funeral. His body had already been in the grave for four days.

Nevertheless, Jesus went from the house to the cemetery, stood at the tomb of Lazarus, said, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus came stumbling out of the tomb, very much alive, although he was still wrapped up in burial cloth. Jesus said, "Unbind him, and let him go."

So as we come to our reading this morning in chapter 12, Jesus and the

disciples are about to leave Bethany to enter into Jerusalem, into events that will change the course of human history.

So listen now for a word from God, beginning in John chapter 12, verse 9.

When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—

the King of Israel!”

Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

“Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming,

sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him

from the dead continued to testify. It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. The Pharisees then said to one another, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!”

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

The ride is a big part of the overall look. The ride – the mode and style of transportation – communicates something to passersby about the person or people being transported.

When Pontius Pilate traveled around Judea, I imagine he either sat astride a stallion or rode a chariot pulled by the finest horse in the land. I imagine that his horse was impeccably groomed and adorned with shining armor and all of the symbols of the Roman Empire.

Like governors and earthly rulers everywhere, I imagine that whenever Pilate went anywhere, he was always escorted by impeccably equipped troops, with shields and sharpened spears glinting in the sun.

The ride is a big part of the overall look. The ride communicates something about the person or people being transported.

As they left Bethany and approached Jerusalem, I imagine that the disciples were smiling about the warm welcome they were receiving. I don’t know about you, but I’ve had the privilege of riding in a parade or two in my day, and it’s a wonderful thing to walk down the street and see the

sidewalks lined with people smiling and cheering as you pass by.

But I wonder if the disciples were still smiling when they saw the ride that Jesus secured for himself. This was no stallion. This was no chariot. John tells us that Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it.

A young donkey – which means maybe not full grown. Jesus was a full grown man, about 33 years old. I wonder exactly how young this donkey was – and I wonder if Jesus feet barely cleared the ground.

A young donkey might not have been broken in or accustomed carrying a riders. I wonder if the minute Jesus mounted up, that young donkey brayed and bucked and kicked.

The ride is a big part of the overall look. The ride communicates something about the person or people being transported.

John has given us a number of names and images for Jesus – the Word made flesh, the bread of heaven, the resurrection and the life, the good shepherd, the true vine, and the list goes on and on. John wants us to know right from the start that Jesus is the Messiah, the one true king, whose kingdom will have no end. If anyone in human history deserved a sweet ride, it's Jesus.

But the King and of Kings and the Lord of Lords has no need of groomed stallions and polished chariots. The prince of peace has no need of an armed escort.

Jesus could have chosen any ride in the world with which to enter into Jerusalem. But he chose the ride which others might have found embarrassing. He chose the ride that others might have called shameful. He chose the ride that others might have rejected out of hand for being too small or too young or too stubborn or just plain wrong. He chose that which was about to be overlooked or pushed to the side and brought it front and center, and gave it a place of honor.

IV

That's one of Jesus' favorite things to do – to take those things that have been rejected or dismissed or pushed to the side, and to bring them front and center. Jesus loves to take those who've been told they're useless, that they don't count, that they're in the way, and to lift them up, to celebrate them, to center their stories.

I wonder, my friend. I wonder if you've ever been told that you're not good enough. I wonder if you've ever been told that you're too young, or too old, or not smart enough, or not strong enough, or not attractive enough, to be of any use to Jesus. I wonder if you've ever been told that the only value you have is based on what you can produce or buy or sell or own.

My friend, Jesus chose you, not because of what you can do or because of how you look or what you possess. Jesus chose you not because of anything you've said or not said or done or not done. Jesus chose you because you are his. You belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to Jesus. He is the Word made flesh. He is the lamb of God. He is the

bread of life. He is the good shepherd.
And he chose you because he loves you
so.

V

The ride communicates
something about the person or people
being transported.

With his choice of ride, Jesus
keeps showing us that the path to
greatness is not in climbing over each to
reach the top, but bending down before
each other in service and love.

Jesus keeps showing us that the
most powerful tools for leadership are
not spear and sword, but towel and
washbasin.

Jesus keeps showing us that the
one who would be the greatest of all
must willingly become the servant of all.

Jesus keeps showing us that the
path to ultimate glory does not lie in
accumulation of power or possessions or
accolades, but in self-denial and cross-
bearing.

Jesus, who all the power in the
world, keeps redirecting our attention
toward those who are usually overlooked
or pushed aside or told that they don't
count. He keeps taking those who
usually at the edges of things, who are
usually in the background, who are
usually ignored or rebuked, and bringing
them front and center. And he tells us,
his disciples who make up this thing we
call the church – to go and do likewise.

And honestly, I think that's one
reason that Jesus drew such a big crowd
as he rode into Jerusalem. They were
much like us. They were people living

through a season of great uncertainty,
through a season where everything
seemed like it was on the verge of
spinning out of control.

They were familiar with the idea
that might makes right. They were
familiar with the idea that the one with
the gold makes the rules. They were
familiar with the idea that some people
seemed born to rule, and some seemed
born to serve.

But they lined both sides of the
road and waved palm branches in the air
and cheered as this rabbi came down the
road astride this braying beast of burden.

They lined both sides of the road
and cheered because maybe, just maybe,
there's more to this life than what we can
see, buy, and hold.

They lined both sides of the road
and cheered because maybe, just maybe,
the accumulation of power and wealth
aren't the ultimate objectives of this life,
after all.

They lined both sides of the road
and waved palm branches in the air and
cheered this rabbi astride this ridiculous
beast of burden because maybe deep
down they knew that love is stronger
than hate. Goodness is stronger than
evil. Light is stronger than darkness.
And even though the cross and the tomb
awaits, we know that victory is ours
through him who loves us.

And look, the world has gone after
him!

Thanks be to God. Amen.