

Aside from the fact that we processed into the church this morning waving our Palms, if you are like me, you probably can't believe that today is Palm Sunday. But given that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem riding that donkey happened about 2,000 years ago, how do we really know that it actually took place on a Sunday?

Of course, for some of us, it is fairly easy to assume that gospels most likely reveal the answer to us, but they don't. All we have is a single clue in John's Gospel, and that comes from putting the events in two verses together. John 12:1 says that six days before Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, to the home of Lazarus, and John 12:12 says that "the next day" Jesus came into Jerusalem.

But the start of the Passover is always on the same date on the Hebrew calendar, meaning that it could have been any day of the week, depending on what year the crucifixion took place. So, to say that Jesus entered Jerusalem on a Sunday is largely based on tradition and some assumptions regarding the year Jesus died (some say A.D. 30) and the fact that all four gospels agree that the crucifixion took place on Friday of that week.

Let's try not to focus too much on the details though and do our best to be open to the possibility that some biblical scholars have suggested that the procession into Jerusalem took place on a Monday. And although some might argue that it probably doesn't really matter when the Palm waving and coat laying red carpet entry actually took place, we know that it did matter to everyone in the crowd that day who were rejoicing when Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem, and it matters if historical accuracy is important to you.

Now if in fact it was a Monday, it was a weekday, not the Sabbath, which, for the Jews, was sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Thus, it was certainly not a "holy day" in a religious sense for the people of Israel. And if it was Sunday, it still wasn't a holy day, a religious day, like most Sundays are for us.

Sunday would have been like our Monday, the first day of the work week, the day after their Sabbath rest — time to sweep the stoop, open the shop, wash the clothes, go to the market, repair the oxcart, get the bread in the oven, deal with matters left over from the previous week that had been put aside for the Sabbath and so forth. Besides, the Passover was just a few days away and so more than likely the Israelites had lots of preparations to make! But, regardless of the actual day of the week, for the people who greeted Jesus as he rode into the city, it was a Monday-ish kind of day.

For us, there's a sense in which Mondays, as the first day of the work week, symbolize the business of life continuing, of resuming after a brief weekend, or a short period of Sabbath relaxation. Life continues to move forward, things go back to normal; we get back to our typical weekly routines. And it isn't a secret that many people find it hard to drag themselves back to work on Mondays.

It's such a tribulation that the very effort to survive Mondays has become the subject of numerous songs, many in the blues tradition, including hits recorded by T-Bone Walker, B.B. King, and Eric Clapton. "Rainy days and Mondays always get me down," sang the Carpenters. But for many people, particularly those with type-A personalities, Monday is a pleasure, a day to attack what needs to be done, to jump back in with both feet, to crank things up a notch.

So what was Jesus doing on that day? Why would he make a gesture so dramatic that the crowds went wild and praised God? The Pharisees, seeing this, asked Jesus to stop them — and by implication, to reject their accolades. So what in the world was Jesus thinking?

For years, the church has called this event "The Triumphal Entry," but that doesn't fit the biblical description very well. Clearly, it was not a covert operation. There was nothing "black ops" about it. Jesus didn't slip quietly into the city under the cover of darkness with a team of highly trained operatives whose former

occupation was fishing for perch in the Sea of Galilee. No, Jesus enters into the city in plain sight on a busy weekday or workday. It was an overt operation. And why did Jesus follow it the next day with another dramatic public act: the “cleansing” of the temple, where he literally whipped up a frenzy?

Although we can’t truly know Jesus’ motivation, it does seem that he was forcing the authorities to take a stand and publicly deal with him. Go big or go home! Apparently, Jesus chose to go big! He lit a fuse that exploded later in the week with the bang of the soldiers’ hammers as they drove nails into his hands and feet. Both his entry into the city, and the ruckus and the rumpus he caused in the temple, defy the Monday mindset: “No, you can’t carry on as usual!” he seems to be shouting. “My kingdom is not of this world, so don’t lose it in the mundane of Monday.”

His behavior sort of doesn’t make sense. Usually, Jesus did not want to be the center of attention. Often after he’d healed someone, for instance, he’d caution the excited person, “Now, don’t tell anyone about this.” “Keep it between us, or keep it to yourself at least.” But maybe that’s the point. Jesus took dramatic, theatrical, out-of-character steps to make something happen — not his death necessarily — but something else.

New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan suggests that as Passover approached, Jesus came to Jerusalem intentionally “to make at least two demonstrations; first against Roman imperial control over the City of Peace and, second, against Roman imperial control over the temple. ... In other words, against the (sub) governor Pilate and his high-priest Caiaphas.”

As Crossan explains it, Jesus intended his very public entry into Jerusalem on the donkey as not only a criticism of Roman power, but as a parody or satire of it. In others words his entry into Jerusalem was both a political and religious statement. Because people were flooding the city from all over the world for the

Passover, Pilate would be sure to have traveled from his home base in Caesarea, bringing with him a large contingent of troops. So Pilate, we can imagine, most likely rode into the city in advance of the Passover on a powerful black warhorse bedecked with colors, banners, insignia and armor.

Jesus, on the other hand, arrives not on a chariot or a stallion, but on a donkey. All four gospels tell the Palm Monday story and the lectionary's choice for it this year is from Luke. In Matthew's version, however, we observe that Jesus' chose to ride a donkey with her colt beside her to fulfill the words of the prophet Zechariah: "Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." And why? To "cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations ..."

Now, if we compare and contrast Pilate on his stallion, with Jesus on a nursing donkey mare with her colt beside her, we see the intended message: "Peace on earth, yes, but not peace by Rome's violent victory, rather peace by God's non-violent justice," Crossan says. Likewise, Jesus also forced the issue when he created a disturbance in the temple. By driving out the sellers and moneychangers from the temple, he acted out a parable, says Crossan.

The temple was the house of God for all the nations, but the temple and its high priest were allowed to function only under the control of Rome, and Jesus' actions with his whip declared this unacceptable to God. Jesus "symbolically destroys the temple's fiscal business by overturning the tables where monies were changed into the standard donation coinage," Crossan says. Which begs the question, Is Crossan right about Jesus' intention with these two actions? Since none of the gospels tell us otherwise, he may well be. In both cases, Jesus was forcing the issue.

We live in an age when a lot of issues need to be forced into the Mondays of life. We may not like it, but the issues have been forced, and we are compelled to either address them or ignore them. The #MeToo movement, for example, has exposed the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault in the workplace and other environments. The Blacklives matter movement has helped bring light to issues of racial profiling and police brutality with regards to African Americans. And (In case you didn't know, the church also has its own version of the #MeToo movement and it is called #SilenceIsNotSpiritual.

We are forced to address the issues raised by whistleblowers — employees or insiders — who become aware of wrongdoings or dangerous practices within a corporation or agency or even a church, and then make the information public so it can be stopped. We can't ignore protestors who put themselves in legal jeopardy, or risk physical violence, to say that something isn't right, fair, for the common good, or pleasing to God. Of course these are just a few examples. I'm certain that if given the opportunity to think of more we could come up with a pretty big list.

So, what issues do you think Jesus would force us to consider as we celebrate his entry into Jerusalem, and as we prepare to contemplate his death, burial, and Resurrection later this week? When Jesus rides into our lives, whether in a church on a Saturday, Sunday, or on the street on a Monday, he also forces an issue for us. He calls us to make a decision: to follow him, to trust him, and maybe even to confront injustice, expose danger, and perhaps even to challenge the arrogance of those who tend to ride over others. So let us follow Jesus wherever he leads us and let us try to do what Jesus did as we seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. Amen.