

Palm Sunday 2021
Saint Mark Presbyterian Church

On Social Media, I enjoy postings by the historian Michael Beschloss. Back in January he was sharing photos from prior inaugurations, and one photo was striking as it seemed to be from such a different age.

In the picture,
The outgoing president was riding in the back of a black Lincoln, he was one of the greatest generals the military has ever known. He represented to some what was good about the nation' past. The man sitting next to him was a younger man, whose name was synonymous with wealth and influence. He had youth and energy and charisma. A man for some who represented the nation's future.

The two were riding toward the Capitol together, where as we know, on the steps, the new president John Kennedy would be sworn in as the current president Dwight Eisenhower looked on.

In the photo, as they rode along, they were led by police on white stallions, there were bands playing and cheering crowds already along the route.

Would this new young leader be able to live up to the expectations that were put on him? Electricity was in the air in the crowd that day. I wonder what it would have been like to be there? Being in the metro area, it is possible that some of you were there that day.

This is how I imagine what it might have been like to be a person along the route that Jesus traveled to Jerusalem on that day we now call Palm Sunday.

Can you imagine the anticipation, the buzz in the crowd on that day? People strained to get a glimpse of this man they had all heard about, riding to town. The

excited conversation among the people on the street: "was he the one who would come and liberate us from these Roman oppressors and restore the kingdom of Israel?" Would he return Israel to prominence?

They may well have been expecting a messiah on a magnificent white horse ready to lead a rebellion, but of course Jesus was a messiah on a humble donkey, unarmed, riding into town.

With the way they had read scripture and history, they may have thought that this was a fulfillment of the dream that a messiah would come and ride in to town triumphant, raise his sword and all the people would follow. Then the glory days of King David and King Solomon would be restored.

"Is he the messiah?" everyone wanted to know.

Messiah is a simple word in Aramaic, which means "the anointed one of God." A rallying cry for the people of Jerusalem.

SO in that moment, as we picture the scene in our minds eye, Jesus rode in on a donkey - a borrowed one at that - not on a white horse, the symbol of power, but a donkey a symbol of peace.

The people cut branches and waved them and spread garments on the road.

They shouted another Aramaic word, "Hosanna" which means "O Save us!"

The people of Israel cheering along the road were so preoccupied with dreams of success that they missed the significance of the scene. Jesus tells us he is a wildly different kind of messiah than what they expected - not one who will bring a military victory,

but one who by suffering will bring ultimate victory over sin and death.

The people on the street were talking about things like power and kingship and even armed conflict, a short-term success and they missed the point of what was happening that day.

I like to call the Palm Sunday entrance of Jesus on a donkey into Jerusalem an enacted parable. Without words, he is demonstrating a powerful shift in spiritual thought. From success to significance. From success to servanthood. From success to sacrifice on the cross.

What do you think of when you hear someone talk about success? What criteria do you use, how do you define it?

Sometimes bumper stickers tell us what success is: "He who dies with the most toys wins!" is one. Or maybe "work is for people who don't know how to fish."

There is a lot of philosophy about life in those bumper stickers.

We all know living in this DMV area how we are deeply influenced to think about success, in terms of jobs, houses, money and power. But there is nothing new about that.

James and John, disciples of Jesus, wanted to reach the top of the power structure they perceived - they asked to be at the right and the left hand of Jesus.

But Jesus shocked them by saying "If anyone wants to be great, let them be a servant, and the greatest of all would be the servant of all."

So we all, or most of us, operate within the bounds of the success oriented culture we live in. And I am not saying that is always bad or evil or destructive. Sometimes that culture can produce resources, enhance personal growth and many other things.

All that Jesus tells us on Palm Sunday is that he offers an alternative perspective on success, one that might be considered radical or shocking by some.

Simply put,
Success is being a servant. Being a servant, in his name.

If we have learned anything these past 12 months besides getting pretty good at Zoom, it is a renewed appreciation for those who serve our communities. Nurses holding hands with dying patients, delivery drivers working into the evening hours, food service people stocking shelves, teachers figuring out in person and at home lesson plans at the same time.

It is good that we have elevated the idea of service during this time.

It has inspired some to rethink what our priorities are, what it means to be successful, and what it means to be a servant too.

Some have chosen to move beyond success to significance.

Since we are nearing Baseball Opening Day, if you are a Nats fan, you remember Ian Desmond, the shortstop from a few years back. I mentioned before that I am a fan because he graduated from Sarasota High school, the same as my daughter, but a few years ahead of her. He is also biracial and has experienced painful racism in his life. I found out he wore number 20 with

the Nats in honor of Frank Robinson, the first African American manager in the major leagues.

In 2020, Ian Desmond decided to leave his considerable salary behind because of COVID, but also as he felt the sting of racism sweeping the country. Taking time off, in Sarasota, he was shocked to see the neglected little league fields for minority communities where he grew up. And decided in his year off to work for the kids there.

And that was great. But fast forward to 2021, it was time to report for Spring Training, get ready for a new season. But, he decided to do the same thing again as last year. To forego another huge salary. Sure he is financially comfortable and doesn't need to worry. He may never play again, I don't know, but for Sarasota he has moved beyond success to significance. He has taken on the role of servant.

Thinking about moving from success to significance is also about perspective and priorities.

Maybe you have seen the movie from a few years ago about the shy person who was named national teacher of the year? His name is Guy Doud. It was such a great story it was made into a movie.

When Guy won this award, his principal told a story about him. That he found Guy in his classroom at 6:30am one morning, moving from chair to chair.

The principal asked him, "What are you doing here so early?"

Guy told him he just comes in early and sits at each child's desk to think about each child's situation. Sometimes he would linger for just a moment, sometimes longer. Sometimes he would pray about a situation.

Guy told him, "Some of these kids come from very difficult environments, where they don't get support. I just want them to see the possibilities of life are still open to them."

The most interesting part was when Guy won the Teacher of the Year, the media asked him if he would be moving to a bigger, more wealthy school district.

Guy just shook his head. It is what Jesus must have thought about James and John

Doud said, "It doesn't matter what size the school is or how much money you get. What make you a success is whether or not you make a difference in somebody's life."

That is moving from success to significance.

An author named Toby Jones wrote a book called "The Way of Jesus" where he talks about people and churches who are geared towards servanthood, which he defines as love in action.

Jesus says "Those who would be great would be servants."

And Jones says:

"After all, Jesus never asked us to be his attorneys, arguing or persuading people into following him. He called us to be witnesses."

On this Palm Sunday as we approach Holy Week, Toby Jones also offers an Easter vision of the church, when he writes that, sure, much has been said about the death of the mainline church. But churches geared toward servanthood, he says, are "resurrected churches" and believes that the promising future is with them.

A witness, a servant, the kind of success that Jesus demonstrates in his ride into town on that donkey. Leads to a resurrected life.

So, the question we ask ourselves is how will we use what we have to be a witness? To serve the kingdom of God? How will we use who we are to serve the kingdom of God?

Can we move beyond success to significance?