

The Hungry Spirit...Faithful
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11

March 16, 2008 – Palm Sunday
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As followers of Jesus, we are defined by two words: disciple and pilgrim. So says Eugene Peterson, who gave us that wonderful translation of the Bible called *The Message*. Almost thirty years ago he wrote a book with one of the best titles I've ever seen: *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. It's subtitled, *Discipleship in an Instant Society*. Ironically, he took the title from the atheist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who said, "The essential thing 'in heaven and earth' is...that there should be a long obedience in the same direction; thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living."

Christians are called, Eugene Peterson says, to a long obedience in the same direction as disciples and pilgrims. As disciples, we are apprenticed to a master, in our case Jesus Christ. We learn at his feet, from his teachings and how he lived his life. We are apprenticed over the course of our lives, a long obedience in the same direction. And as pilgrims, we are on the move, going somewhere, growing, dynamic, expanding. Again, it's over the course of our lives, that long obedience in the same direction.

We have another word that describes this lifelong journey of obedience. It is the word "faithfulness." Faithfulness is not a fifty-meter dash. It is a marathon, the full 26.2 miles. Faithfulness is not drive through window food. It is crock-pot Sunday dinner, food cooked over a long period so all the flavors have time to marry, as Emril Lagasse says.

Faithfulness in the Christian life is a long obedience in the same direction. Our faith not about being a flash in the pan or having a meteoric rise. It's not about being great. It's about consistency, persistence, showing up, being a dependable disciple day after day and year after year. Jesus modeled this during the climactic week of his life, which begins today, Palm Sunday. Today marks the beginning of the end. He could have ridden away from Jerusalem. He could have gone back to Galilee and delivered another Sermon on the Mount. He could have gone to the wilderness and fed another crowd of 5,000, or again challenged the scribes and Pharisees. And all of

these would have been good options. He could have done many different things, but Jesus was faithful to his mission and practiced long obedience in the same direction.

Matthew's account of Jesus' journey into Jerusalem is somewhat different from the others. Matthew says that Jesus and his disciples were near Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives. I stood on the Mount of Olives last year and looked across the ancient Jewish cemetery that rests between the Mt. of Olives and the Old City of Jerusalem. It would have looked much the same to Jesus and his disciples. He told the disciples to go to a village "ahead of you," possibly referring to the village of Bethany, perhaps where he had a friend with whom he had made prior arrangements. He told them that they would find a donkey tied there and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them back, he said. If anyone stopped them, the disciples were to say, "The Lord needs them."

Matthew, unlike Mark, says that the disciples got two animals: a donkey and her colt. Now listen to how the text reads in verse seven, "they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and *he sat on them.*" Doesn't that sound like he sat on the donkey and the colt at the same time? He sat on *them*. It was not uncommon for a young foal to be tethered to its mother when it was being introduced to work. In a crowded area where the colt might be frightened by noise and activity, this would be even more important. What Matthew likely was saying was that they got two animals, put their cloaks upon them, and then Jesus sat on the cloaks on the colt.

It is important to note that this was not a war-horse. It was a donkey and was reminiscent of something that happened long before. It is recorded in I Kings 1. Solomon was being crowned King of Israel. Remember, Solomon was the son of King David. On the day of Solomon's coronation, King David summoned the priests and said,

Take with you the servants of your lord, and have my son Solomon ride on my own mule, and...let the priest Zadok and the prophet Nathan anoint him king over Israel; then blow the trumpet, and say, 'Long live King Solomon!'

They did exactly as the king commanded, and then the text says this,

All the people went up following him, playing on pipes and rejoicing with great joy, so that the earth quaked at their noise.

When Solomon arrived in the city, someone who did not know what was happening asked, “Why is the city in an uproar?” He then learned the good news: there was a new king over Israel. Solomon, son of King David, had become King Solomon.

Many theologians believe that this coronation of King Solomon was being replayed in the life of Jesus. Like Solomon, Jesus rode a colt, a mule, not a mighty stallion. Notice, the crowds again were ecstatic, rejoicing with great joy. They shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” Who was the son of King David? Solomon, whose name came from the Hebrew word *shalom*, meaning peace and well-being. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” the people shouted. “Hosanna in the highest heaven!” And notice that when Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem, Matthew says “the whole city was in a turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” There was good news again. There was a new king.

I’m convinced. Matthew made his point. Jesus was a new King Solomon, a new king of peace and well-being. He didn’t ride away from Jerusalem. He rode into Jerusalem, rejecting the trappings of grandeur and power. Jesus showed up. He was faithful to his vision of life and faith all the way to the end. Our Lord practiced a long obedience in the same direction. It started with the temptations in the wilderness, where he could have veered off course. Today it culminates with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He was faithful.

Have any of you kids seen *Dr. Seuss’ Horton Hears a Who!* yet? Man, wouldn’t it have been great to be one of the 200 kids in Huntsville who won a private screening of the movie? That would have been pretty cool! Now, I like *Horton Hears a Who*, but that is not my favorite Horton story. My favorite is *Horton Hatches the Egg*.

For those of you who don’t know, Horton is a pig, right kids? Oh, you’re right! He’s not a pig; he an elephant. This is what happened to Horton. Lazy Mazie, the bird, grew tired of sitting on the egg in her nest. She wanted a vacation. So she smooth talked Horton into sitting on the egg while she went to the beach. She promised not to be gone long, but she never returned. And there was poor Horton sitting on her nest on her egg.

He sat and sat and sat on the egg because he gave his word. As storm blew in with lightening and thunder, but Horton did not move. The weather turned cold, and though icicles hung from his trunk and his feet, he did not move. When springtime came, so did Horton's friends, who made fun of him. They yelled, "How absurd! Old Horton the elephant thinks he's a bird!" They laughed and laughed, but he didn't move.

The scary part was when the hunters came sneaking through the brush. They were about to shoot Horton. "Three rifles were aiming right straight at his heart!" But he didn't budge. He gave his word. He said,

*Shoot if you must
But I won't run away!
I mean what I said
And I said what I meant....
An elephant's faithful
One hundred per cent!*

Thanks goodness the hunters didn't shoot Horton, but they did capture him and the egg, put him in a cage, and sold him to the circus. The circus took him to "Boston, to Kalamazoo, Chicago, Weehawken and Washington, too." He ended up down at Palm Beach, and guess who was still on vacation there? Lazy Mazie. Suddenly the egg began to hatch, and Mazie wanted it back. She accused Horton of stealing the egg and demanded that He get off her nest. He didn't argue or get angry. With a sad, heavy heart, Horton gave the nest and egg back to lazy Mazie. But that's not the end of the story, is it? Horton gets his reward, but I'm not going to tell you what it is. Friday I bought two copies of this book and donated them to our church library. So as soon as worship is over, you may hurry to the library and read the ending for yourself.

You know what I love about Horton? "I mean what I said and I said what I meant...An elephant's faithful one hundred percent!" That's what. He was faithful.

It's Palm Sunday, and we remember the faithfulness of our Lord. We affirm that that is our calling too. Not to be great. It's about consistency, persistence, showing up, being a dependable disciple day after day and year after year. Regardless of what others do or don't do, let us define ourselves as disciples and pilgrims and practice a long obedience in the same direction.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, you were faithful to God for us. Help us now to be faithful to God for you. Amen.