

March 29, 2015, Palm Sunday: John 12:12-16

## **Palm Sunday is a story of disappointed expectations, of what happens when someone you admire refuses to be who you think they should be.**

by [Ayanna Johnson Watkins](#) in the [March 18, 2015](#) issue

Chronologically, last week's passage from John comes after this week's. Assigning the stories out of order is a clever way the lectionary makes us listen differently. We need this, since we may think we really know this story: the palms, the donkey, the shouting. Those of us who have spent at least a year in church know well how this story goes—and the harsh turn it takes shortly after.

John's version of the triumphal entry is a tad crisper than Mark's, which the lectionary also lists for this week. There's no intricate plot to "borrow" a donkey, and the people don't lay their cloaks on the ground. But they do quote the scriptures, including Psalm 118, also assigned for Palm Sunday: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." They want Jesus to be the Messiah. They believe that he is.

This is a story of disappointed expectations, of what happens when someone you admire refuses to be who you think they should be. The people want a hero. The poor are suffering under Roman oppression. Even the well-off are living a circumscribed life, allowed to succeed and flourish only within the confines of a foreign culture and its values. There is no room to be the chosen people of God they know they are. They are sure of what kind of change they need.

Often, I too am sure of what kind of help I need, what kind of change would really make a difference. I need a swift repair for my broken heart. I need a slash-and-burn kind of thing to eradicate racism. I need a literal flattening of some high places, so that those who make decisions about health insurance might know what it feels like not to have it. But it doesn't happen this way. Day after day, I wake up to more greed, more discrimination, more heartbreak. God just won't do like I want.

It's as if we see the donkey but we don't really get what it wants to tell us. Of all the high and glamorous stallion-type animals Jesus could have ridden in on, he chooses a donkey—a young and inexperienced one. He could have ridden in on something that would have set his feet at the crowd's eye level. Instead he rides in on an animal that is probably just tall enough to put Jesus at eye level with those standing on the side of the road.

Jesus' decision says this: I'm not going to ride above you, all high and mighty. I'm going to be here on your level. And I'm not going to slash and burn everything you think is bad. I'm going to ride the inexperienced colt, the one who doesn't know what she's doing. That's what Jesus chooses. It's disappointing—unless you're the donkey. Then it's more like, "Coach is putting *me* in the game?!" If a donkey is qualified, then maybe there's a role for the ordinary among us.

Recently I visited a clergy friend's church in the St. Louis area. As I found a seat, a sweet-faced, warm hug of a woman welcomed me. She brought me a short form they give to visitors, and she happily gave me a cup and a pen with the church's name on it. She brought me water and offered me food. She was in charge of sharing the announcements at church that day, and she did so in the same warm, sing-song voice she'd used to make me feel at home.

Later, I was talking with my friend the pastor about her involvement in the area's protests over the shooting death of Mike Brown by police officer Darren Wilson. I knew she'd been organizing area clergy to participate, to be a theological voice in the swirl of voices speaking up for justice and police reform. She confirmed that she had been busy—mostly trying to keep up with her people, who she says beat her to the streets on a regular basis. In fact, the very congregation member who had so warmly welcomed me was one of the first and loudest protesters to be seen and heard in the streets of Ferguson.

Really? That sweet, cuddly lady? Sure enough, the pastor assured me. She considers it part of her ministry of hospitality.

I never got a chance to speak with the woman about it. But I imagine she saw in Mike Brown someone who should have been welcome in his own neighborhood. Not a criminal, but a neighbor. He deserved to be greeted, engaged, and heard—not shot and killed. He deserved the dignity of a proper preparation and burial, not to be left dead and exposed in the street. This woman was not a government official, a

well-known activist, or even a pastor, just an “ordinary” doorkeeper in the house of God. But she stood up for what she believed, and she continues to make a difference.

The disciples don't realize the magnitude of what has transpired until later. Often, neither do I. That Sunday in St. Louis, my expectations were happily disappointed. I pray they will be this week as well.