

Take a donkey

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Architect Lewis Mumford argued that the beauty of a particular house comes from building it on the most challenging feature of the land. If there is a depression in the land, says Mumford, use it. If a big boulder lies in the middle of the spot where the kitchen should go, put the boulder in the kitchen. If the land fails a percolation test because of a waterfall, put the waterfall in the living room—and build the house on stilts.

In other words, don't make beauty easy—make it tough. Palm Sunday offers a similar approach to spirituality. In his journey to Jerusalem, Jesus makes a choice for the difficult. He makes a big ceremony out of it, with the first seven verses of the gospel text describing the mode of conveyance, and the next four, the event itself. The prelude to Holy Week is long.

Why does the destination get such little attention in our lives, and why do the means of getting there so frequently absorb all of the attention? We spend a lot of time figuring out how to get wherever we're going—and often the answer is "You can't get there from here." Other times the answer is "Take a donkey." Donkeys traverse rough terrain; difficulty and donkeys go together. The destination may be beauty or world peace, but you'll need a donkey. Means matter; if you have no means, your ends are probably fatally flawed.

The great ceremony of the donkey and the palms and the arrival all signal that an important decision has been made. The servant has set himself on the road to kingship by way of the difficult ground transportation of servanthood. The boy from Bethlehem is on his way to Jerusalem. Jesus is not going to settle for being human; divinity is his destination.

He marks that divinity by a paradox in triplets. One is the humble king: to be great and godlike, he says, we must become small and humble. The second is the ironic nature of praise: all those cloaks and field branches go on the ground—the people

want to worship Jesus, but he is not impressed by their praise. A third is the connection of life to death: to have a great life, we must be prepared for death. We can have anything we can let go of—and that includes our heartbeats.

The psalm prepares us for paradox: the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. What we think is going to be true is not going to be true. Watch out for your assumptions about both God and salvation: God and salvation may show up riding on an ass. They will not be interested in kings or praise. They will choose a kind of death on behalf of a kind of new life.

Isaiah talks about the servant setting his face "like flint" against his enemies and going out from them. The gospel, however, is about a different sort of journey. While the first servant sets his back against those who struck him, the second travels to where they live. It looks like a big fancy parade, but most of the motion is actually internal. Jesus goes inside himself and makes a decision for Jerusalem and then for the temple. From his heart to the heart of the city to the heart of his religion; this is the destination of the donkey.

Go to the hardest spot in the land and build. Flip your assumptions. Hire a donkey and go as deeply as you can into difficulty. From there you will rise.