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## Who's Driving the Bus?

(Mark 11:1-11) "When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples 2 and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. 3 If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" 4 They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, 5 some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" 6 They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. 7 Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. 8 Many people carpeted the road with their cloaks, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. 9 Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! 10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" 11 Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve."

(Mark 15:1-15) "As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. 2 Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He answered him, "You say so." 3 Then the chief priests accused him of many things. 4 Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you." 5 But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed. 6 Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. 7 Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. 8 So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. 9 Then he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" 10 For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. 11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. 12 Pilate spoke to them again, "Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" 13 They shouted back, "Crucify him!" 14 Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!" 15 So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified."

When Barbara and I first moved to California from Indiana about 15 years ago, we were introduced to a wonderful African-American family whose roots went very, very deep into a number of the congregations in the area. It was a big extended family; the current adult generation had five brothers and sisters, and most of these had children. And the

matriarch of the family, the widow of a famous African-American Disciples of Christ preacher, was this wonderful and spiritually powerful woman, and when you were in her presence you knew you were blessed indeed. But we learned all of these things only later, because at first we were often just confused. For, you see, every member of that family had two names that they were known by. And so, early on, we would be introduced to one member of the family, and then, in a conversation sometime somebody would ask us if we knew so-and-so, a member of that extended family. I would think, “no, I haven’t met that family member yet” but it would turn out that in fact I had, but the person was using her “other” name. They didn’t do this out of any desire to confuse people; it was simply a long, long family tradition that each person went by two different names, and some people knew each of them by one name, and some knew them by the other name.

Today is the day in the Christian year which also goes by two names: Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday. Now, you and I are probably much more familiar with the first name, Palm Sunday, and the way that it recalls – as our children re-enacted this morning – the **triumph** of Jesus, his entry into Jerusalem in what turned out to be the last week of his earthly life. We recall the people’s overwhelming display of adoration as they threw down their garments and cut the branches off of the trees for Jesus to ride upon. It was the ancient equivalent of a ticker-tape parade whose celebratory mood is so well captured in the hymn we opened with this morning: “All glory, laud, and honor, to Thee redeemer King.” For, indeed, this is the kind of entry reserved for kings who come in glory, and this is the Sunday when we celebrate the Kingship of Jesus and his entrance not just into Jerusalem but into our hearts, and minds, and souls.

But from the earliest days of the Church, this Sunday has also had another name and another mood and another story to tell and to anticipate. For, indeed, this Sunday, like our family in California, is also known by a second name – “Passion Sunday,” and its mood is the anticipation of the end of Jesus’ earthly life. And so on this dually-named day we are

called to hear not *just* the acclamation and adoration of the crowd surrounding Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, but also to begin to hear, faintly but nonetheless just as real, the crowd's angry shouts just a few days later that this man must be killed. For there, but a few days later, in Governor Pilate's courtyard the story says that the crowd shouted just as loudly: "*Crucify him.*" In the space of a few days, we go from the cheerings of the crowd to the jeerings of a mob who, when given a choice, actually chose to save the life of a murderer instead of the one they had proclaimed their King just days before.

So this Sunday – Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday – has this double-focus – we celebrate the triumph of Jesus but we also anticipate his earthly end; we witness the adoring crowd but also know it to be the same crowd that helped send Jesus to the cross. Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday. Adoration and anger. Jesus – and Barabbas.

What I want to think about this morning is the behavior of that crowd there in Jerusalem. How could they turn so quickly in the space of so few days? To say that the crowd is "fickle" just doesn't explain enough. After all, we're not talking here about the coach of a football team, we're talking about people who believed that Jesus showed them the very depths of God, but now who would help murder him! How do we account for this remarkable change? Well, to understand that crowd's flip-flop I think we must turn inward and look at our own souls. What are we like anyway? For these folks there greeting Jesus on his entrance to Jerusalem were probably not so different from you and me – and we realize, with some uneasiness, that we might have been there too – **both** with the crowd that acclaimed him and then the crowd that accosted him. What kind of folks were they? What kind of folks are **we** that both of these stories can be true?

Philosophers and poets and theologians and ordinary folks have long sought to answer this very question: What are human beings like, anyway? The philosopher Plato's image was that every human being was like a chariot pulled by two strong horses, horses which sometimes got out of the driver's control. There is much pop imagery in our that

depicts human beings as having an angel sitting on each shoulder, a good one and a bad one, and that sometimes we ignore the former and follow the latter. Some psychologists have suggested that all of the good things that we are also have their “shadow side” to them, and, for example, our altruism is never as pure as we might hope. Now, there may be some truth in all of these images and they may help us think about what the nature of human life is like, but I have another image this morning, one that may seem a little weird, but one that almost all of can probably relate to: *human life is like being on a bus*. Now that may sound strange, but I think it’s only because it’s a contemporary image. After all, when Jesus told stories about Christian life using images of shepherds and vines and fig trees, these may have sounded just as startling to his audiences because they were also, in their day, quite contemporary. So let me try this image from our own experience, because I do think that we can think about what life is like by this image of life being like a bus. And, you know what? It’s a bus with lots of passengers on it. A bus that usually **we’re** driving and in control of but sometimes those passengers take over the wheel or the navigation. And I don’t know about the bus that is your life, but on mine there is a motley crew of passengers:

Sometimes the bus that is my life is in great shape. The weather’s good. The highway is clear. The destination is obvious. The directions for how to get there are easy to follow. The bus is running great. I’m driving and the passengers are behaving.

But sometimes the bus of my life seems to get hijacked. And then it seems that a maniac is now driving, wildly and dangerously. A driver who doesn’t seem to know where this bus of a life is supposed to be headed and doesn’t much care and seems to enjoy taking silly risks.

There’s also this very timid, very shy, very un-self-confident person on my bus who sits in the back and hopes no will ask him to drive or navigate. But sometimes, even though he doesn’t want to, he ends up driving life’s bus and he hates it. And he drives too

slowly and too tentatively and is scared the whole time.

And sometimes, just as with Plato's sparring stallions or those bickering angels, fights break out in the bus of my soul. And one of the passengers says that the bus should take the interesting but dangerous way to the destination, while another argues that, no, the bus should stick to the safe route even though it's longer and more boring.

And occasionally – and this seems to happen when I least expect it or am prepared for it – there seems to be a complete stranger driving my bus. I've never seen him, I wish I didn't know him, I don't know how he got on – but he's driving my life into some totally unexpected and even unwanted places.

There's also some folks who have hidden on my bus; they're stowaways. They seem to come out only in the middle of the night. They try to take my life's bus down all sorts of worrisome roads, past scary scenery, full of regrets and what-if's. They're usually gone, hidden away again, by the light of day but they make those middle-of-the-nights anxious and depressed.

And every once in awhile, the bus that is my life just comes to a screeching halt. And life is immobilized; the bus dead on the road. None of the passengers has any suggestions about which way to go or it even seems that they just may not care anymore.

I could go on, but you see the point: as we journey in our own lives towards the destinations and goals that we have set for ourselves, life is indeed sometimes like that bus, driven and guided by now one and then another. And each one in that crowd in these two stories from Mark today also were the very same way. They had their own menagerie of moods, their own competing voices, their own sense of being driven first this way and then that way. Even Peter, even Peter, the one upon whom Jesus would build His church, the whom Jesus called "the rock," seemed at times to have two entirely different drivers in his life – the one who said he'd follow Jesus anywhere he was headed, and the one who

pulled off the road and denied that he even knew Jesus, not once but three times.

But let us continue: There come moments in every life, yours and mine, when we are driving down the roads of our lives, and we discover two hitchhikers by the road. One is named Jesus. The other is named Barabbas. And here's the deal: we stop. And sometimes, anyway, we pick up both of them. They both want to guide this bus we call our life. But they give contradictory directions. Jesus says, "follow me" and Barabbas says, "No, go this way." And we can't go both ways at once. And so we have to let one of those hitchhikers off. Which one shall it be? Shall we let Barabbas be our guide and navigator? Do you remember who he was in the scripture? He was a zealot. He was a man of violence. He was in Pilate's jail for inciting a rebellion to violently overthrow the Romans. Shall we let him drive? Or shall we throw him off the bus in favor of Jesus, who proclaimed the universality of God's love, even for those that we might prefer not to love, this Jesus who called for trust in the Kingdom of God, trust in the power of un-conquerable love, not in the Kingdoms of this world.

Shall Barabbas be our guide? A man who would use the weapons of hate to say that some of the folks God made weren't as worthy as other ones, who would never allow that a Roman could be saved? One who seemed to say that the end justified the means. Or shall it be Jesus who is the navigator of our bus, the Jesus who preached that those who are peacemakers are the ones who shall be called "blessed." The Jesus who said that God cares for every sparrow that falls and every human being that lives. The Jesus who through His spirit seeks to work tenderly and lovingly with each and all of us, and calls us to do the same with all those who we encounter on life's journey.

Shall we let this Barabbas be our guide, the one who seems to see life as simple, as composed of nothing but black and white, over-simple answers to over-simple questions, the one who would resort to violence to solve life's problems? Or shall we follow Jesus,

who knows that life – wonderful, glorious, challenging, painful, beautiful life – is always lived in shades of gray, and who knows that God’s love encompasses and accepts us just as we are but loves us too much to ever leave us where we are?

Which one? Which one?

Pilate’s question at the end of the second story is our question too: “What then shall I do with this Jesus?” But the decision we make is never one we make without resources and guides and friends. For the very story of Jesus’ life, and the very way that that life has been embodied by the person sitting next to you in the pew this morning, is the story of how God is ever-available to you and to me to empower us and to help overcome those disturbing and wayward passengers who would drive us where we know we really don’t want to go. It is the story of grace, the story, as St. Paul puts it, of the God who offers salvation to each and every one by grace through faith.

Which one? Which one?

I say we choose Christ as our guide, for the way of Barabbas will embitter us and cannot save us. I say we choose Christ as the one whose directions we follow, even when the route he chooses leads towards a cross. For the other way may seem more attractive sometimes, but it’s a dead-end. I say we set aside the the hate-mongering Barabbases on our bus. Instead let us choose and re-choose every day the God who has chosen and keeps choosing us, that we might stand with the crowd on Sunday and not the mob on Friday, the crowd who shouted “Hosanna” – which means “God **will** save us.”

I say we follow Jesus. How about you?