

For most of us experiences that seem out of sync and out of context with all that’s gone before are likely to provoke fear. That’s natural. We are made so that routine makes us comfortable. If you’ve ever read a bedtime book to a child or grandchild, you know that they usually want to hear the same story over and over again. I would sometimes change a word with my sons, just for fun, something like: “Red Riding Hood came across a big, bad bear.” They would protest: “No, daddy! It was a wolf.” They knew the story by heart and wouldn’t accept random changes to the familiar plot.

We love the kind of stories in which we know who the villain is, who the hero is, and when to cheer or boo. That’s why old-fashioned melodrama was so popular. We are accustomed to the scenario. The heroine repeats: She can’t pay the ransom. The villain responds: She must pay the ransom. At last the hero appears: He pays the ransom. “My hero!” she cries. We know what’s coming and we love it, even as adults.

The danger in this desire for the routine and the comfortable is that within that framework, we tend to think we are in control. I have made the point earlier that our insistence on control is one of the most apt descriptions of sin. Particular sins vary greatly, from the socially acceptable to those for which we put people in jail. But the source of most of those sins is the desire to control everything about our lives, including the lives of our family and friends, and even control God. A psychotherapist once said, “Watch out for the fellow who talks about putting things in order. Putting things in order always means getting other people under control.” In its purest form, that is what sin is all about, whether you are a mobster or simply a manipulative person who looks so pure and self-sacrificing in the world’s eyes. Unfortunately, our efforts to control don’t stop at the door of the sanctuary. Even Sunday worship services tend to fall into all-too-predictable patterns.

Back when I was a youth director at Harris Street United Methodist Church in Harrisburg, PA I was invited to preach a sermon. The youth group helped out with the sermon, titled, “Voices from the Balcony.” Some students were planted in the balcony where they liked to sit, and assumed the roles of various Old and New Testament characters, shouting questions at intervals, interrupting the sermon. The congregation, unprepared for these outbursts, reacted strongly. Some said, “I’ll never forget that sermon. God really got my attention.” A few folks were offended. “Let’s not ever do that again. It absolutely spoiled the reverence of worship for me.” Honestly, I thought what they meant was it spoiled their sleepiness. Even in worship, we have a need to feel in control. That’s why we print a bulletin. We want to know exactly what’s coming next for the next hour. Worship is the last place most of us would welcome the unpredictable, even when it’s a spontaneous movement of the Holy Spirit.

Many of Jesus’ movements in his three-year ministry appear to be somewhat unpredictable to his followers, perhaps especially the jumble of events during that last week in Jerusalem before the crucifixion. The disciples warn against going there at all. His opponents will be waiting to trap him. It is not a safe place. Nevertheless, Jesus insists they will celebrate the Passover there—unexpectedly.

His entry by means of an impromptu parade is once again a strange twist of the plot. Let’s consider a few details. In the middle of all of the turmoil of a city crammed with visitors preparing for Passover, Jesus suddenly announces that two disciples should fetch a donkey (at least in Matthew, Mark and Luke they go

and do this.) John writes, “*Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it.*” I wonder how the disciples reacted to this plan for a parade. A few, the more adventurous, might welcome it. “Just what we need—a change of pace.”

But I think that more of them would be having an anxiety attack. “Oh no. Does the Master know what he’s doing? Does he understand the danger? Does he realize the temple authorities are out to kill him and us as well?”

Bruce Larson, in his book, *Living Beyond Our Fears*, speculated how a church today might react to the idea of that hastily assembled parade. We can hear the objections. Has the long-range planning committee been told about this? Has finance OK’d the funds for the donkey? Has the insurance representative been informed about the insurance needs? Do we need to apply for a permit? Has the official board (in Jesus’ case Peter, James, and John) given its approval? This Palm Sunday parade is a strange one, no question about it. It is also a puny one, by today’s standards; a one-float parade. One man on a donkey is the extent of it.

On the surface, that Palm Sunday parade looks spur-of-the-moment, but we have come to see that Jesus is far from capricious. He is always intentional. Zechariah, over six centuries earlier, had predicted that the Messiah would arrive in just such a way. “*Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey’s colt.*” (John 12:15). The Messiah’s coming in a triumphal entry on that first Palm Sunday evokes a number of strange responses: adulation from the crowd, opposition from the Pharisees, and obedience from many of the disciples.

Even in this familiar story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem, we are told “*Do not be afraid.*” Here it takes the form of a prophecy from Zechariah brought to mind when Jesus comes into Jerusalem. Before the prophecy from Zechariah is spoken, we must understand the context of what is happening. Jesus was in Jerusalem, just before the festival of Passover. There were people gathered from many nations, and the excitement surrounding Jesus was at a fever pitch. It was rumored and the rumor was spreading that he was the Anointed One, the Messiah, the One Israel had longed for since Zechariah and before!

When Jesus rode a young donkey into town, he was essentially confirming himself as the Messiah, the one spoken of in Zechariah. Israel sorely longed to be set free from the Romans. They wanted to be free from the fear of conquest, so the sight of their Messiah coming into Jerusalem was the long-expected sign from God that Israel did not expect at this time.

In this country, we don’t live with a fear of conquest in the way the Israelites did in Jesus’ day, but each one of us lives with different levels of fear—often fear of the unexpected. Many of us fear when our next 9/11 will be, a type of conquest carried out by radical extremists who hate us and our country. We plan, we prepare, we organize, and we manipulate as a way of managing our fear, but as Christians we should know that we are followers of an unpredictable Lord. We can’t chart out how God will or will not intervene in our lives or what joys and misadventures lie ahead. That’s why we need to give up our predictions of what life is going to be like, and expect that the Lord will surprise us. God loves us too much to let us suffer from boredom.

Last fall, this personal notice appeared in a large city newspaper: “To the person who administered CPR late on the morning of November 25 to a Mr. Marcelino downtown at Second and Washington. We are

very grateful to you for saving our father's life. You have given us something to be truly thankful for this Thanksgiving." Everything was unexpected. An unexpected medical emergency. An unexpected someone who saw a need and stopped to help in the manner of the Good Samaritan.

Christian friends: Don't be afraid of the unexpected. Whatever fears we find ourselves locked into, we can take heart that the King is coming to free us from every fear! "*Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion...*" "*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*" "*Blessed is the King of Israel.*" Amen.