

Following God can lead us to some unlikely places. Jesus kicked off a week that was eventful even by his own standards with a bizarre stunt that didn't make much sense and didn't seem to accomplish much. But just like in any college movie, any story that starts with stealing livestock has to have some redeeming value. Seriously though, why would Jesus insist upon this one mode of transportation? Walking would have been easier, more comfortable and possibly faster, too. A horse would have been more majestic. But Jesus obviously wanted a colt very, very badly, and the scene resonated deeply with the observers along his route into Jerusalem.

Jesus was going for symbolism, not pragmatism. Riding a colt symbolized a noble but peaceful journey. It was indeed the perfect transport for a king whose kingdom was not of this world. And the people of Jerusalem responded with adoration and acclamation and their own symbolic gesture. They threw their cloaks, their outer garments, onto the road before Jesus. If you're concerned that you missed the part about the palms in the first Gospel reading, which we even call the "Palm Gospel," don't worry, you didn't miss anything — it's just not there. Palms only show up in John's account of the day. Yet the name persists. For one thing, nobody wants to participate in "cloak Sunday." Just doesn't have the same ring to it. But more to the point, while we might like to imagine ourselves lining the road with palm branches, are we willing to get our cloaks dirty?

We like to think we're better than the crowds who so swiftly turned on Jesus, going from "Hosanna" to "Crucify" within a week. But is our reserve so much better than their zeal? Are we willing to leave our comfort zone, our life so thoroughly tamed that even when it becomes unpredictable is still composed of familiar elements? While I usually maintain a pretty low view of human nature, in the light of what I experienced last night, I have to say "yes," there is hope for us to recapture the boldness that marked Jesus and his first followers as not quite of this world.

Last week I attended a bizarre stunt, the Capital Area Justice Ministry's "Nehemiah Action" event, along with many other faithful people from our city and its environs. We gathered to hear about the immense need for affordable housing, violence interruption, and diversion of youth from the criminal justice system, and the ministry's thoughtfully constructed, evidence-based plans for addressing them. Elected officials were asked to give yes-or-no answers to the group's policy proposals, although predictably, not all of them did. The organizers periodically had to remind the audience to be respectful. Although the ground outside was soggy, I'm pretty sure no one seriously considered throwing their coats on the ground to make things easier for the officials.

Nobody would have mistaken our crowd for the one that welcomed Jesus on the original Palm Sunday, but there are a few important connections to make. Remarkably, people attending last week's event were not united by kinship or a partisan identity, but were united by dedication to an idea, that of loving our neighbors as

ourselves, and to putting that idea into practice. We were filled with hope, and then some in the crowd turned on the officials when they did not get the answers they wanted. The tension between Pilate and the Good Friday crowd feels a little closer to home now.

But the way in which we were most truly following Jesus's journey was that we were also moving, however slowly, to confront the darkness that pervades the world.

Jesus was going to his inevitable death and he spent the precious week leading up to it with further acts of confrontation and provocation: teaching, arguing, denouncing, and most flagrantly, tearing through the money-changers who infested the Temple with corruption and greed. Perhaps fortunately, we didn't have any tables to flip over, but we also couldn't blame an occupying army for the problems we sought to confront.

The Romans were a convenient target for Jesus's crowds to blame but we have the mixed blessing of a government that, at least in theory, represents us. It's true that our elected representatives should consider themselves to have failed so long as even one person in this, the wealthiest country the world has ever known, lacks the basic necessities of life. It's also true that they haven't made serving the poor their top priority because, despite the consistent teaching of the Old and New Testaments, all of us have failed to demand change beyond our own discomfort and pet causes, failed to put the needs of the poor at the top of the political agenda. All of us go into Holy Week with a need for redemption. All of us shout, "Crucify."

And yet even on the most solemn Sunday of the year we have such hope. We have the work and witness of the crowd that came out to stand up for the poor and vulnerable, and we have the knowledge that they are only the tip of the iceberg — there are many more who offer time, money, and prayer to support our neighbors in need. But what gives us far greater hope is the power of the one who leads us still, Jesus, who comes in the name of the Lord; who brings heaven's peace and glory into a world that yearns for them.

We need his leadership. We need Jesus to take the reins, as he literally did as he rode the colt. Left to our own devices, we can only wander in futility. But when we allow Jesus to lead us, we can already taste triumph. So renew your effort at following him to unlikely places this week, to the upper room, the garden, the cross, the tomb and to the most challenging place of all: your own heart. Jesus already knows everything that lies within our hearts, but he'll only enter them if we welcome him, shedding our protective layers of justifications and excuses and letting them fall before his anointed feet.