

The Guy with the Donkey!

PALM SUNDAY
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Matthew 21:1-11

Today marks the beginning of Holy Week, the final movement of the church year's journey through the life of Jesus. It is a day where celebration and tension sit side by side. As Jesus enters Jerusalem, very large crowds spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road shouting *"Hosanna to the Son of David!"*

Hosanna is an Aramaic word meaning *"Help!"* *"Save us!"* The word is both praise and plea and an echo of hope and messianic expectation. But this event is not simply a joyous celebration. There is a restlessness and turmoil in the city. Jerusalem senses that something significant is happening, even if it cannot yet name what it is. The story quickly moves toward betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion. The same city that welcomes Jesus will soon call for his death.

On the other side of Jerusalem, at the same time Jesus enters, Pontius Pilate, Governor of the Roman province of Judea, is riding into the city on a war horse. He leads the Roman imperial cavalry into Jerusalem. It is a display of power: soldiers marching, banners flying, horses and chariots announcing authority and dominance.

Jesus' procession mirrors the shape of that event, but with dramatically different symbols. Instead of war horses, two donkeys. Instead of armored soldiers, regular folks and disciples. Instead of imperial banners, cloaks and branches laid on the road. The scene resembles a royal procession, yet everything about it overturns the usual symbols of power. There is a distinct contrast between Jesus' and Pontius Pilate's entry.

But there is something odd about Matthew's account. He tells us that when Jesus and disciples come near Jerusalem, they will find two donkeys in the village. Jesus knows they are there. He sends two disciples to fetch them. *"Untie them*

and bring them to me. If anyone objects, simply say: 'The Lord needs them.' " So they go. They find the two donkeys and they take them. Matthew doesn't say anything about the guy with the donkeys. What's up with the guy and his donkeys? I'd like to ask him a few questions. Is there something we can learn from him? The first question I'd like to know is why two donkeys? Luke tells us that there is only one donkey that is a colt. He is the one who mentions that the owner questions the disciples. "*Why are you untying the colt?*" The disciples reply, "*The Lord needs it.*" So the owner allows him to take it. Mark's account is similar to Luke's. There is only a colt. But bystanders ask, "*Why are you untying the colt?*" And in John's account Jesus finds a young donkey and sits on it. John portrays Jesus as being uniquely and explicitly in control of his destiny when compared to the other Gospels. Jesus is depicted not as a victim of circumstances, but as a sovereign figure who moves toward a pre-determined purpose. Only in John's gospel do the people take branches of palms to meet Jesus.

So who's right? Does it matter? I say no! And this is why. Each gospel writer is addressing a different audience. Each of them, though similar, has a different perspective and important point to make. Matthew is written mainly for a Jewish-Christian audience. His language and theological focus are deeply rooted in Jewish tradition and scripture. Some of his major themes include Jesus as the Messiah and King and a focus on discipleship and community.

In this lesson, Matthew draws on a verse from Zechariah that is familiar to the people. Take a moment to get out your bulletins out and look at the gospel lesson as I read Zechariah 9:9.

*"Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey."*

Is it the same? What do you notice? Matthew changes the text. He leaves some words out and adds another. He omits Zechariah's characterization of the king as "triumphant and victorious" in order to place the emphasis on Jesus as the humble" or "gentle" king, who redefines the nature of kingship. To emphasize the fulfillment of Scripture, Matthew inserts an "*and*" into Zechariah's text. It sounds like the king is sitting on two donkey's. It's curious. It doesn't make sense. Can anyone sit on two donkeys at the same time?

In addition, Matthew mentions three times there are two donkeys. Why does he do this? Some commentators explain the changes away saying, "*Matthew made a mistake in translation.*" Maybe, but I don't think so. I agree with commentators who say, Matthew was making a point. He was using a rhetorical device scholars call *poetic parallelism*. This term simply means that biblical writers state an idea multiple times to emphasize a point.

Matthew also refers to another text in their Scripture: 1 Kings 1:32-37. The crowds pave Jesus 'way into the city with shouts of acclamation and with their own cloaks and branches. It is reminiscent of the jubilant royal entrances and processions of Solomon who was Son of David! Jesus will bring about the redemption of God's people. But there will be a cost for him. He has already told the disciples he will die. But, for now, that horrifying reality is pushed into the background as the crowds wave branches and spread garments on the road in a first-century version of the ticker-tape parade.

What really intrigues me is the owner of the donkeys. Max Lucado, the author of the book: *And the Angels Were Silent: The Final Week of Jesus*, says he would like to "*meet the guy with the donkey.*" We don't know anything about him. We don't even know his name. All we know is that he gave his donkey.

Lucado says, "*When we all get to heaven, I want to visit this fellow. I have several questions for him. How did you know? How did you know it was Jesus who needed a donkey? Did you have a vision? Did you get a telegram? Did an angel appear in your bowl of lentils?*"

Lucado goes on to say, "*Was it hard to give? Was it difficult to give something to Jesus for him to use? I want to ask that question because sometimes it's hard for me. Sometimes I like to keep my animals to myself. Sometimes when God wants something, I act like I don't know he needs it. How did it feel? How did it feel to look out and see Jesus on the back of the donkey that lived in your barn? Were you proud? Were you surprised? Were you annoyed? Did you know? Did you have any idea that your generosity would be used for such a noble purpose? Did it ever occur to you that God was going to ride your donkey? Were you aware that all four gospel writers would tell your story?*"

It makes me wonder, What else does God want me to give? What does God want each of you to give. If asked, are we willing to give it? Do we, in fact, name Jesus king of our lives? Do we sometimes get the impression that God wants us to give him something, and sometimes we hold back because aren't sure? Do we then feel bad because we've missed our chance? Other times do we know he wants something, but we don't give it because we are too selfish. And other times, we

hear him obey. Then we feel honored that a gift of ours was used to carry Jesus into another place. And still other times we wonder if our little deeds even make a difference in the long haul.

The point is: we all have something to give. And no matter how big or small the things we give back to God, they matter. Maybe you can sing, or hug, or program a computer, or write a check. Whatever we have to give is our "*donkey*." When we look back in scripture, what we find there is a long line of people who gave little things to a big God: Rahab's rope, the Samaritan Women's water jar. David's sling, Samson's jawbone, and Moses' staff that spilt the sea and smote the rock.

We need only to sit back and think of our blessings and all the gifts God has given us. What is it that we can give back or do that would make a difference in someone's life? Do you have a little time to help put together food packs for children who are food insufficient in the Palisades School District? We are doing that right after the service. What about helping out for some of the events planned for our 275th

Anniversary? Do you know some of our church history that others don't know? Easter is right around the corner. We will need help setting up for the Sunrise service. What about calling a friend you haven't heard from in a long time. Dropping off meals when someone is ill, helping with yard work, or giving someone a ride. Writing a note to say *Thank you*. Sending a card or a text to brighten someone's day. The opportunities are endless.

There are so many things we can do, if we only think about it. And the things we do can be small kindnesses--affirmations, hugs, smiles, and kind words. God uses tiny seeds to reap great harvests. Jesus rode on the backs of donkeys--not on steeds or in chariots—just simple donkeys. He knew he would be giving up his life for the sake and redemption of all. In Jesus' name, amen.