



“Untying Our Donkeys”

Rev. Dr. Michael L. Gregg

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Mark 11:1-11

It's that time of year again. You know, the time of year when children slap, slash, and swat each other with giant palm leaves. At my previous church I always had to play referee in the Narthex and keep the kids from either injuring each other or breaking their palms as they waited, oh so patiently, for the processional hymn to begin. Well, here we are, at Palm Sunday once again and I'm sure many of us can remember growing up as a child, exceedingly eager to walk briskly down the aisle, waving a tree branch around, shouting 'hosanna' at the top of our lungs, and doing it all with the permission of our parents and God. It is one of the only times during the year when we can actively celebrate our faith with our voices, our bodies, and our spirits.

Not only is Palm Sunday a celebration filled with excitement and joy, I think the story of Jesus processing into Jerusalem in his final days has many great characters, topics, and themes. Preachers, through the years, have focused on the disciples, the palm branches, the garments laid one the ground, the road to Jerusalem, the children who followed, or the reaction of the crowd. However, as a young person, the thing that always interested me the most was the donkey. It seems to me that there were few sermons given about the donkey that Jesus rode and what that donkey could possibly teach us.

To me, the donkey seems to be the star of the show, the main character of this main event. Yet, Mark hardly gives us an information about this important animal. And we don't really get much information about Palm Sunday in general. Mark devotes 115 verses to the Tuesday of Jesus' last week and only a measly eleven verses are given to the procession of palms. Although we celebrate Palm Sunday every year, it really isn't the star of Holy Week. But today is indeed Palm Sunday, and in the eleven verses, Mark spends more than half of them on one character, the donkey.

As the story goes, Jesus instructed two unnamed disciplines to go into the village ahead and look for a colt on which Jesus could ride. And usually when the disciples did something significant in the Gospels, they were mentioned by name. But in this case, the disciples were nameless. I wonder if the disciples didn't get named because they were embarrassed of their mission. Or maybe they grumbled under their breath about all the things they had to do for Jesus like getting the bread and the fish so Jesus could create a banquet so thousands could eat; or making a run to the kitchen to get the heavy jugs of water for Jesus to turn into wine. The disciples, like the untied donkey, had to do all of the dirty work while Jesus did the exciting miracles like walking on water. I'm sure if I was one of the disciples I would have been disappointed at the mission to go and fetch a donkey. But, little did these two disciples know that their task was critical to the Palm Sunday event. They were to retrieve a special animal, perhaps the most overlooked character in this story.

Unlike Baalam's donkey in the Old Testament, this colt did not speak, see angels, or impart some divine wisdom. But, this Palm Sunday donkey, in my opinion, was the most important part of the story, and we often overlook it to focus on the fanning fronds or the robes on the road. This small and insignificant animal seemed to be at the center of Jesus's mission and his entrance into Jerusalem. The attention was on the donkey and not the disciples. The focus was on the beast of burden rather than the service of Jesus's followers.

One of my pastor friends, Alan Rudnick, says, "To modern readers the donkey seems to be an unlikely and surprising device for Jesus' use. That is because we see donkeys primarily as work animals capable of carrying heavy loads, or as docile creatures used for children's rides, but certainly not as the animals of choice to transport triumphant kings. In the ancient world, however, donkeys were used for ceremonial purposes. Whereas horses were symbols of war, donkeys were symbols of peace and often used to enact treaties."

This donkey, this colt, had importance to the Jewish people as they remembered their teachings and their history. Jesus' riding the donkey echoed the regal arrival in Zechariah's prophecy: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he; humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." The text for today seems to indicate that Jesus needed the diminished donkey, not the dotting disciples to fulfill that old, old prophesy.

But why wait until getting to Jerusalem to procure your transportation? Doesn't it seem odd that Jesus would walk ninety miles from Galilee to Bethphage and only then secure a donkey for the final two miles into Jerusalem? It is quite a climb up to Jerusalem, which sits about 3800 feet above sea level, but still, Jesus had come so far already without needing an animal to carry his weight. If I were going to borrow a donkey, I would borrow one that comes with unlimited mileage. So, we see that Jesus wasn't untying the donkey because his feet were tired. Instead, he was carefully planning his entry into Jerusalem by observing every nuance of the Biblical understanding of who the Messiah was. The triumph of Jesus came not through might but through meekness. Not through war but through peace. Not through strength but through service.

This procession down to Jerusalem was one of those very public moments in Jesus' ministry. It could be called his most brilliant act of political theater, according to Rev. John Allen. Allen thinks that "Jesus proceeds toward Jerusalem, with a crowd that undoubtedly boasts some of the same sorts of outsiders Jesus has been connecting with all along: sinners, the possessed, the sick and blind, women, and foreigners. The crowd that shouts 'Hosanna' would have been laughed at by any sensible members of society who happened upon this odd ritual. Much like I imagine today those with a high sense of their own political value would little understand what compelled these odd folks to gather as they had, creating trouble when they had little to gain but jail cells and crosses."

Marcus Borg and Dominique Crossan, in their book *The Last Week*, make the case that this peculiar celebration does not happen in isolation, but is rather a counter procession, mimicking Pilate's imperial procession entering the other side of Jerusalem at the same moment. The grandeur of the Roman procession was meant to highlight Pilate's superiority over the weak and

that he held the reigns of a warhorse and the reigns of the Jewish people. But Jesus and his followers creatively re-imagined their weakness as strength. They did not deny their poverty, they proclaimed it in the form of an untied donkey. By proclaiming their weaknesses, they denied the authority of the empire to define their reality for them. They celebrated their Messiah on a colt rather than worshipping at the feet of the political cult.

I hear from fellow ministers who travel to the Holy Land and to the Mount of Olives, that, if you go, you better be ready to take a ride on a donkey. As tourists get off their buses they immediately face one of the largest Jewish cemeteries in the region that overlooks the Garden of Gethsemane, scattered with the remains of olive trees. Then, they can look straight ahead at Mount Zion and see the ancient walls of the city of Jerusalem. Visitors can also walk the route that Jesus took when he entered the city with the palms and the crowds.

But, historic sites are not all that pilgrims see upon exiting the tour bus – a couple of local men are usually waiting for them. These men wait for wide-eyed tourists and say, “Would you like to borrow a donkey to ride down the hill?” They often cajole further, “Perhaps you can sit upon one and we can take your picture?” These donkey owners are trying to make a living by charging people to “borrow” their donkey for a unique experience in one of the most famous places on earth. Of course, some nostalgic tourists take them up on the donkey rides and then a comical scene ensues as inexperienced visitors bump and bounce on the back of the beast, not nearly as graceful and deliberate as our Lord and Savior. But if the tourists want to take the Bible seriously, they should insist that no money should change hands, for Jesus simply “borrowed” the burro.

And it’s true, the Bible insists the untied donkey was borrowed. As we heard, Jesus sent two disciples ahead of him on his way to Jerusalem. When they got to the small village of Bethphage, he said, “Go to the village up there, and you will find the colt of a donkey. Untie it and bring it to me. And if anybody asks, ‘Where are you going with my animal,’ simply say the Lord needs it, and we will bring it right back.” And it’s the borrowing that should catch our attention. Kings don’t need to borrow their beasts. Kings ride into Jerusalem on their mighty steeds, their war horses, gratified and grandiose with hundreds of people lining the streets. Kings own their animals and own the attention of their followers. But Jesus did it differently. Jesus came on a borrowed donkey, not like a king at all.

And like the donkey, we know that Jesus was on borrowed time. Jesus had borrowed the weight of humanity and the weight of the cross to share with us the Kingdom of God. Jesus was born in a borrowed stable and laid in a borrowed manger. As he traveled, he had no place of his own to spend the night so he borrowed a bed. He rode into the city on a borrowed donkey. He ate his final meal in a borrowed room. He was crucified on a borrowed cross, wearing a borrowed crown stuck upon his borrowed brow. And when he died, somebody placed his body in a borrowed tomb. Jesus was a borrower. He did not grasp or grab what did not belong to him but freely shared that which was given to him. As the early church pondered the identity and character of Jesus, it declared, “Jesus did not count equality with God as something to be clutched, grasped.” He did not hold onto heavenly glory and throw his weight around. He never forced the Kingdom of God upon anyone. Rather, Jesus emptied himself. He gave himself completely away for the benefit of others.

And he commanded the same of those who followed him. As he instructed, “When you go out to proclaim the good news, take no money, no knapsack, no extra tunic, no extra shoes, not even a walking stick. Take only a word of peace, borrow the bed given to you, and proclaim that God’s kingdom has come very close.” At its core, the good news of God does not need a lot of props. What it needs is the kind of people who believe that an untied, borrowed donkey can make all the difference.

Today we remember how the Savior of the world was the one who untied a borrowed donkey to ride downhill to his cross. Today we remember how Jesus gave himself to the world. Today, on this festive day, Jesus rode his untied, borrowed donkey into the center of a city that would reject him. Today, we remember that Jesus, a person with few possessions, emptied himself for the benefit of saving all the world. And God keeps doing this saving work through us. God continues setting us free, free from all selfishness, arrogance, and pain, and anger, and shame. God continues to claim us in the name of Jesus who owned very little, borrowed all, and ultimately wished to possess our hearts.

As we continue through Lent and experience the pain and rejection of Jesus, we are reminded that not only are we borrowed but we are often tied. We are tied down by many things—by guilt, anxiety, and jealousy. Some of us are tied down by the need to forgive, but we cannot bring ourselves to do it. Others of us are tied down to grief and the rollercoaster ride of feelings from losing someone we love. We are tied down to our obsession with popularity or our dependence on wealth. We may be tied down to our phones, computers, social media, and be unable to relate to people face to face. Some of us might need to let go of the fear of being radically different as we live love, peace, faith, and joy. As Palm Sunday Christians, we need to be untied from that which weighs us down. We need to be untied to carry Jesus from the cradle to the cross. We are meant to ride with Jesus, accompany Christ, to follow him on his journey to Jerusalem.

We cannot fully commit to God when we are tied in emotional knots. We cannot fully carry Jesus when we are strangled by sin. We cannot fully lift the weight of the Messiah when our own experiences overcome us. When we are untied, we can live lives of faith and freedom. When we are untied and set free, nothing can stop our love for God and our passion for our neighbors. When we are untied, we are resurrected people. And, as resurrected people, as Christians headed towards Easter, we need to get off of our war horses and untie our donkeys. We need to change the script of what a Christian looks like. We need to follow the Jesus who rode the donkey of peace and processed with the hard-pressed, the dispossessed, and the depressed.

So today, on Palm Sunday, we remember that Jesus was on borrowed time. He borrowed his dwelling place here on earth to reveal to all people true love. And we must also remember that we are on loan from God. We have work to do before we are reunited with our Creator. We, like the borrowed beast of burden, are untied and set loose to be used for the work of God. And the work of God is to carry Jesus, from the cradle, through the crowds, and ultimately to the cross. The work of God is to live as untied and set free people in the world so that we may unite with the one who was tied to the cross. And as Easter approaches, let us remember that in order to be resurrected people, untied people, that we must be those who loose the chains of oppression, prejudice, racism, abuse, and anger. We must unbind this world so that all people, all people, can

experience the one whom the tomb could not hold. My friends, carry Christ this week. Live unbound this week. Set people free this week. Live as those untied.

Amen.