

For God So Loved
Lent 2019: Palm Sunday
Luke 19:28-40

1. The history of triumphal entries.
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After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' say, 'The Lord needs it.'" Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They replied, "The Lord needs it."

They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."
(Luke 19:28-40, niv)

Donkeys aren't typically thought of as noble creatures. Common, noisy, barnyard animals is a more accurate description. They eat large amounts of food, rest during the hottest part of the day, and don't like living outside of a group.

There is another word in our language for donkey – a small, three-letter word that has a dual meaning; one refers to the animal, the other is for a type of person...When it's used to describe a donkey, it's actually an appropriate word from the original languages. It's a shortened version of words like "esil," "assal," or "assin."

There is another use of that word that means something entirely different, associated originally with a person's backside, but then it evolved to mean a very derogatory description of a person's character. We're not sure when that evolution happened, but many literary scholars believe the first use of the word in this way

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might have come from Shakespeare's *Midsummer's Night Dream* in 1594.² What's interesting is that the two uses of the word started out completely different, but have come together to be somewhat synonymous. It's hard to hear that word without immediately thinking of both meanings. And what's especially amazing is that, just now, I went through that entire description without ever saying the actual word! That's some great work on my part; you ought to be impressed with me.

So with some of the understanding of that word in mind, you understand the humility involved for Jesus in the passage that was read for us.

Despite their reputation, donkeys are fairly small, so they are not suited for heavy farm work like an ox. They aren't regal or quick-footed like a horse. They are often used as pack animals because carrying things and people from one place to another seems to be their best skill.

But donkeys are also often known for their stubbornness. I remember several years ago when our boys were younger, we visited the Grand Canyon, and we got up early one morning to hike down and then back up the Bright Angel Trail – a several mile hike down the canyon that reaches three digit temperatures as you get toward the bottom. We did it by foot, but many people later in the day chose to rent mules – an offspring of a donkey. They aren't always cooperative, and several times we passed people attempting to coax their mules to move – they can be stubborn.

Unlike horses, donkeys aren't skittish. They don't run away from danger, but their curiosity and intelligence often make them walk into situations that would cause a horse to wisely be frightened. In that regard, they are not afraid to look danger in the face. They are not afraid to walk bravely toward that which could cause them harm, making them an excellent choice of animal to ride on toward death, because, while we consider this Palm Sunday triumphant, the march of triumph was *still* a march toward death. The cheers of joy in one moment all too quickly will turn to cheers for execution in the next.

This image in Luke of a donkey, though, is not just an image of a simple barnyard animal. It is also a symbol of obedience and faith in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds; a symbol of peace and the ushering in of a new kind of kingdom in the presence of a violent, worldly kingdom. With this type of radical obedience and faith, we are once again called to follow Jesus. So let's first understand...

1. The *history* of triumphal entries

I remember one time as a kid, my little league team had won a game, and I had played a particularly good game. I played first base and I had several key put-outs on defense, I had scored a couple of runs, and I hit in the winning RBI. So, yea, in my mind, I was the reason we won that game. Since my parents weren't at the game – Mom was home and Dad was working – I marched into the house, strode through

² <https://www.etymonline.com/word/ass>

the door, ready to be welcomed as the conquering hero that I was. No one was in the living room waiting to greet me and ask me about the game, but I didn't let that phase me. With my chest fully puffed, I walked into the kitchen where my mom was, sure that she would've already heard of my heroic performance. Instead of praising me for my powerful playing, she wanted to know why I hadn't cleaned my room before I left for the game, like she told me to. But that didn't matter – I was sure that once she knew about my game she'd soon sing my praises. So I interrupted her to tell her about my game. She didn't seem to share my enthusiasm or appreciate my interruption. Instead, she told me to march into my room and get it cleaned like I promised. So much for my triumphal entry! That was far different than the Roman triumphal entry. In Rome, the triumphal entry was the highest honor granted to emperors and generals during the Roman Empire. It was a processional into the city of Rome, led by government officials, followed by the sacrificial animals (for the temples of the Roman gods), followed by the champion in a chariot, usually in regalia of embroidered purple followed by the spoils and captives of war.

This processional was given to those who were victorious in war, and there are some historians who say it was only done for those who had killed at least five thousand of their enemies.

The processional included festivals, dancing, singing, and flower petals thrown on the ground.

The path for the processional was often cleaned ahead of time, cleared, prepared and secured by the government to welcome in the triumphant victor of war.

But when Jesus road in on a donkey, it was a...

2. A ***different*** triumphal entry

The processional for Jesus wasn't going into Rome, the capital of the Empire; Jesus' grand entry instead went into Jerusalem, which was the location of the temple and the religious heart of the Jewish faith.

Also, Jesus' entry wasn't as the victor of a war that killed thousands, but instead was a march toward death. Christ's death and resurrection would be an act of victory in a *different* way.

There are many things going on in this narrative of the passage; symbolism, lessons being taught, and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies – one of those being that Jesus is illustrating that victory does not come through violence but through humility—an example of the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God (the last shall be first, blessed are the meek, etc.). Jesus is putting an exclamation mark on this truth through his triumphal entry.

This triumphal entry took place at the beginning of a festival, the Passover, seeming to mirror some of the components of a Roman triumphal entry. *By the way, please:* if you want to learn more about this, then please come to the Passover demonstration and communion this Wednesday evening at 6:30pm in the Worship

Center. You will be amazed at how the Passover supper, practiced since the time of the Exodus from Egypt, is a powerful prophetic representation of the arrival of Jesus as Messiah.

But let me say this, at least: Passover is not about war but about remembering the way God spared the lives of the Jews and the miraculous ways he cared for them, freeing them from oppressive Egyptian rule.

This Passover festival would be in stark contrast to the festivals of the Romans bringing offerings for gods like Jupiter. Jesus instead is highlighting the remembrance of the Exodus and pointing to a New Exodus of freedom from sin, bringing an offering toward the temple—only, this offering was himself.

There also seem to be some parallels that, while the Jews are celebrating the salvation of their firstborn sons, ultimately their salvation was arriving through the sacrifice of God's only Son.

Instead of a horse and chariot, Jesus rode in on a donkey. Again, this was an illustration of humility. It was a young donkey, common in the area and not esteemed. Donkeys were pack animals, not war animals. Donkeys were also a symbol of peace in contrast to the horse being used in war.

Zechariah 9:9 is an Old Testament prophecy that is being directly fulfilled by Jesus riding in on a donkey, which a lot of sermons talk about. But it's also making reference to another Old Testament passage. When the patriarch Jacob had gathered his children around him to bless them before he died, he makes an interesting statement about the future king of Israel:

“The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his. He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch; he will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes.” (Genesis 49:10-11, niv)

There's reference here to the Messiah being a ruler, riding in humility on a donkey, and shedding his blood for us. We don't refer to that passage very much, but even in Bible times, the Jewish Rabbis *always* saw it as a Messianic prophecy.

So Jesus' triumphal entry was much different than the Roman ones, making some clear statements about who Jesus is and what he had come to be for us and to do for us. So very clearly, this ride on a donkey for Jesus showed his...

3. Obedience on the way to the cross

“The Lord needs it” is the only phrase needed for the owner of the colt to let her go. This shows an obedience and faith that the colt will be used for good. While we don't know who the owner is, we can assume some level of relationship to Jesus, since he faithfully lends his donkey to the disciples.

If you saw someone taking an animal that belonged to you, you might be inclined to get physical with him or at least ask him what he was up to. The owner of the colt asked what was going on before he defended his property, and the disciples said what Jesus told them to say: "The Lord needs it." That's all they said – no persuasive speech. No arguments. They didn't have to talk the owner into it. They didn't have to reassure the owner that he'd get the colt back in reasonable time without damage. The Lord needed it, and the owner gave it. This kind of simple obedience and willing response should be an example to us, and ought to characterize our relationship with Jesus: if we have it and Jesus wants to use it, we should let Him have it without question.³

While the crowds appeared in celebration of Jesus's entry into the city, Jesus knew what the entry would ultimately mean, even though the crowds didn't. Still he entered.

Again, there is a great deal of intertwining of Old Testament precedent and prophecy. The crowds shouting is an echo of the story in 2 Kings 9:13 when Jehu is being instated as king; they shouted, "Jehu is King!" and spread their cloaks on the bare steps at his anointing. With Jesus' entry, the people are quoting Psalm 118:26 with their praises, which was a hymn of praise to God for the anointing, arrival, and rule of God's king.

The crowd's confession is a part of Jesus' slowly, intentionally, revealing his true identity. In the Gospel of Luke, Luke moves from prophetic assertions (2:22, 26; 4:41) to rumors (9:7-9, 18-19), to secret revelations (9:20-22, 28-36, 44-45, 17:22-37), to indirect public proclamation (18:38-39), to public proclamation (19:38) as the crowd sings his praises. So the full cycle of declaration of who Jesus is, is now complete.⁴

There is some question though about the sincerity of the crowd's singing; they might be singing his praises, but it seems they have motives that are different than it appears.

When I was in high school, both my junior and senior years I was asked, along with two other students, to represent our high school at Boys' state. The first year I went, I was not accustomed to politics at all. I thought it was going to be like some fun camp.

One of the things we did was meet as a smaller group with some other students in our group, to set our platform and determine who we were going to attempt to get elected, and what our strategy was going to be, but not to let others know what it was. All the groups were doing this.

So after doing this, we were at lunch, and a friend of mine from another school who was in a different group, starting telling me how glad he was that I was there, what a

³ Ken Heer, *Luke: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007), 260.

⁴ David Neale, *New Beacon Bible Commentary, Luke 9-24; A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (2013 Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City)

great leader I would be, and was really building me up. Saying that he was sure I was such a good leader that I must have had an influence in our group's candidate and platform and strategy, he then asked me what it was. I gladly told him what we were doing. When I was finished, he said, "That's enough – that's all I wanted to know. I was just using you to find out your group's plans." I had been played! He acted like he was my friend, but he really only wanted to use that friendship to get information out of me that he wasn't supposed to know. That was a hard lesson to learn – one that unfortunately has even played out in church for me as a pastor with people in church.

Well *that's* what was going on here – many of the people were not sincere in their praise to Jesus. They just wanted him to be the kind of violent, conquering king that *they* wanted. But Jesus knew that, as soon as they didn't get what they wanted, they'd turn on him and shout for his crucifixion. Their false praise was manipulative flattery, but unlike my high school friend and me, it didn't work with Jesus. He knew what they were up to. They were trying to play him.

The crowds were singing Jesus' praises, but their motives made it sound like cursing in God's ears. Were they cheering for Jesus as the Messiah who lays down his life for his people, or did they think he was entering the city to overtake it with a violent rebellion, overthrowing the Roman Empire?

The Jews longed for a Messiah for sure, but there was a misunderstanding about what that Messiah would look like and what the Messiah would do.

These crowds turn quickly from praise and admiration on Sunday to shouts for death just days later, which would indicate that their praise was motivated by hope that the Empire would be violently overthrown.

Yet, despite the motivations of the crowd, Jesus still knowingly walked closer to the time and place of his crucifixion. And in doing so, he made clear to his followers then and to those of us who are his followers today, we are...

4. *Called* to *embody* the Kingdom of God

We are called to live as citizens of the kingdom of God. The walk to the cross reminds us that we are called to pick up our cross and follow Jesus. We are not called to seek the praises of people, but to be obedient to God's purposes to save the very people who may very well turn on us.

Like Jesus, we too are also supposed to walk this path of sacrifice out of love for God and others. And any pain or self-sacrifice it might cost us, we are also supposed to remember that, ultimately, death leads to resurrection.

This march of Jesus and his entry reminds us, too, that we are called to be peacemakers. While the world calls for change through violent upheaval, just like the crowds that day, Jesus teaches us to be people of peace.

We are supposed to be humble servants; we are not supposed to seek glory in the ways of the world but in the meek and humble way of Jesus.

Even our festivals and sacrifices as God's people should look different than the world.

We celebrate in hope, not in a frenzied need to keep the gods satisfied. Jesus has won, once and for all, so we mark the victory and triumph of Jesus through our own festivals and celebrations. This is why we have times on the calendar like Lent to remind us of who we are and where our citizenship lies. Advent, Pentecost, and other days call us back to this reminder that we celebrate the victory of God through Jesus Christ.

While the world celebrates at the altar of the war gods of our day, we celebrate the faithfulness of God. While the world celebrates violent victory over enemies, we seek peace through sacrifice for the sake of our enemies.

We are to remember whose we are and where our true citizenship lies. We follow Jesus. We are part of the kingdom of God.

When I became a Christian at the age of 17, my citizenship changed from this world to the Kingdom of God. I don't have dual citizenship, attempting to serve two rulers. I'm merely in this world now as an ambassador for Christ's Kingdom, where my *full* citizenship lies. I'm here on a work visa, I guess; maybe a green card. Honestly, since my loyalty is to the laws of the Kingdom of God, and since our enemy, the devil, still has some authority here, I guess you could say I'm an illegal alien. But make no mistake: if you are a follower of Christ, you are a citizen of the Kingdom of God, not the values and priorities of this world and its celebrations.

As this Lenten season comes to a close, we are reminded of our citizenship. We are to be part of the kingdom of God, which is a kingdom that looks so different than the world around us. We remember that we are to follow in the footsteps of our King, who rode on a common barnyard animal in humility and obedience. We follow in obedience as we walk toward the crosses we are called to carry and the ways we are supposed to embody the kingdom of God to the world around us, being a servant to them. We celebrate today our Messiah who has come in the name of the Lord not with swords, not with horses, not with sacrifices to Roman gods but with love, with truth, with peace, with humility, with sacrifice, and with the hope of resurrection. May we follow passionately after this our King.

Pray