

The Royal Donkey

Palm Sunday // Matthew 21:1-9

Pastor Duane Smets

April 14th, 2019

- I. A Poor Man's Horse
- II. A Weak Warrior
- III. A Beast of Burden

Well, happy Palm Sunday everyone! With today we kick off what is known in Christian history and tradition as "Holy Week" where we remember and re-enter the story and the drama of everything that went down in the last week of Jesus life on earth leading up to the cross and then His resurrection.

This week in our church we are diving in all the way. If you pay attention to our social media or receive Pastor's Buss's devotionals, we're going to be providing guides all week long. Each day the guides will tell you a little bit about what Jesus did and give you some things to think and meditate about.

That'll go from Monday through Friday and on Friday night we'll gather here at 7pm for our special Good Friday service, which is unlike any other service we have all year. It'll be a dark, somber, candlelight service where we rehearse what happened, sing dirges and spend time in reflection and prayer for about 45 minutes.

Then on Easter Sunday we'll all return with joyous exuberant hearts to celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead. This Easter The Sheep Draw Trail will be playing, we've got a number of people being baptized, there'll be an old school ice cream truck here as well as a Photo Booth and other giveaways for friends you bring.

There really is nothing like Holy Week and I really want to encourage you to participate in all of it. Join Jesus and walk through each of the things He went through each day this week. Be here on Good Friday to enter into the pain of Jesus' suffering and then return on Easter in joyous celebration with us.

Two things you can do to help are:

1. Invite people. There is nothing more powerful than a personal invite. I'd suggest a text or phone call if not in person and then definitely put something out there on your social media. If you don't know what to post, we've got you, just text EASTER to 619-648-5444 and we'll send you a graphic and a few different phrases you can just copy and paste. This is the number one time in the year people are most likely going to say "yes" to your invite and not be weirded out by you inviting them to church. I'd love for each one of us to invite and bring at least one person!
2. Baptisms. There is something so significant and moving about seeing people get baptized. It's a major mark and point in a person's life where they publicly my core identity as a person is as a son or daughter of God who has been given life by Jesus Christ. Going in and out of the water is this sign and seal demonstrating that bond to Jesus' death and resurrection as the source of life. So pray for the

people getting baptized, ask others if they've been baptized yet and encourage them to do so because it's how Jesus said we're to identify with Him and then lastly consider it for yourself. If you have not been baptized since you've really believed in and followed Him as your savior I'd highly encourage you to do so. I'll be in the Living Room, the room with the couches just inside the glass door off the patio after service to talk with anyone who thinks they might be interested.

Alright, so this year for Holy Week I decided to use animals as our theme. There are A LOT of animals in the Bible. Animals are one of core things God created in our world. Animals play a significant role in the story of the Bible and development of His people. And there are a handful of animals in the Bible that play crucial roles at critical points, some of whom God even identifies with in certain ways saying, 'I'm kind of like that!'

So for Easter we're looking at Jesus as "The Lion Who Roars." For Good Friday we're looking at Jesus as "The Lamb Who Died." And for today, for Palm Sunday we're looking at the second most famous donkey in human history.

You guys know the most famous one right? The donkey named "Donkey" in Shrek animated with the voice of Eddie Murphy. The second most famous donkey is the donkey Jesus rode on His way into the city of Jerusalem to undertake the final and chief stroke of His mission on earth to win, free and save the people of His kingdom.

I titled this sermon, "The Royal Donkey". Let check out the story as it's told from Matthew 21:1-9 in the Bible. Why don't you stand with me as we read it and then ask God to work in us through it.

Matthew 21:1-9

1 Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once." 4 This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,

5 "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'"

6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. 7 They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. 8 Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

I've got three points for us today, "A Poor Man's Horse", "A Weak Warrior", "A Beast of Burden."

I. A Poor Man's Horse

In this first point I want to start off by talking about donkey's in general, how they were seen back in Bible days which hasn't really changed much from then to now. Donkeys were mainly work animals used to plow fields or to transport people or goods.

But you didn't really want a donkey. What you really wanted was a horse. Horses are stronger, faster, more agile and in general more obedient animals. But horses were a lot more expensive, typically only owned by wealthy merchants or kings. So if you couldn't afford a horse you got a donkey, which was smaller and weaker, slower and known for being stubborn animal.

It's kind of like the difference between owning a Ford Pinto from the 70's, one of the crappiest cars ever made and owning a nice new Cadillac Escalade. You don't want Pinto, you want the Escalade. Nobody wants a donkey.

Kids love asking "What's your favorite animal?" In all my life I've never heard someone say, "A donkey!" Nobody likes donkeys. In fact in the Bible people would insult other people by calling them donkeys. Talking about Ishmael Genesis 16:12 said he was, "a wild donkey of a man."

But Jesus wanted a donkey for His kingly ride into the city. In the story Jesus and His disciples are on foot walking toward the city of Jerusalem and they arrive at the city's outskirts in a little village named Bethphage just about a mile outside of town. They get there and Jesus says, "Hey guys, will a couple of you go steal me a donkey?"

Which was weird. Jesus and the disciples had traveled around a lot and they were always on foot. This is the first time in three years Jesus wants a ride but they only have a mile left to go. But Jesus wanted to make a statement with His entrance.

For the last three years Jesus has been teaching, preaching and healing people all along claiming to be the messiah and promised king who would come and save God's people. At the time God's people were living under Roman rule and tensions were high. If you think political tension is high in our country in the fight between Democrats and Republicans, none of it holds a candle to what was going on in the country of Israel at the time.

Tensions had become so bad the people were crying out for revolution and looking for a leader to lead the revolt against Rome. Jesus comes a long proving Himself to be a kind and strong leader invoking the titles people used to talk about this deliverer like King, Son of David, the Christ etc. So tons of people think this is it, this is the moment because everyone knows if you're gonna start and lead a revolt it had to go down in the capital city of Jerusalem.

Jesus knows that. And throughout the three year ministry of Jesus He has shown He has everything at His fingertips. There's no disease He can't heal and no opponent He can't defeat. He was a homeless traveling vagabond with no money but when taxes were demanded of Him, He told his disciples to go fishing and they'd find a coin the fish's mouth to pay taxes with.

Again and again and again He's shown that He has divine power and knowledge and we see it again in this story. He's a mile outside the city but taps into His all knowing and all seeing ability and is able to tell the disciples exactly where the donkey He wants will be, "tied up". Then He is able to look

forward in time and hear the donkey's owner concern, so He gives His disciples the exact right thing to say which will prompt the donkey's owner to give it to Him.

Jesus says to first reply, "The Lord needs it", which is a pretty presumptuous thing to say because by saying that He's not only referring to Himself as the Lord, which for the Jew would have meant God and for the Greek would have meant Caesar, the Emperor...but He's also then implying with that line that the donkey really belongs to Him anyway. As the Lord He owns everything and as the soon to be crowned new king, would be considered free to use at His disposal.

Let's stop and think about this for a minute. Jesus clearly has the power, influence and sway to ride in on any animal He wants for His grand entrance. It would seem to make sense to pick something kingly and majestic to accent His right to rule, evoking awe and submission. If it were me I'd probably have called down a dragon or rode in on a bear or something, or at least a bright white stallion. But instead Jesus picks a poor man's horse, a donkey, as His chosen animal.

It's here that the upside-down nature of Jesus' kingdom begins to really crystallize. He had said things like, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3)" and "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor (Luke 4:18)."

Too often and too easily as human beings we tend to esteem the rich and the wealthy as the only ones worthy of leading. Jesus as the King of the Kingdom was initiating a new kind of leadership, an upside-down one, exemplified in the donkey.

Donald Kraybill in his book "The Upside-Down Kingdom" says this,

"The kingdom of God points to an inverted, or upside down, way of life that contrasts with the prevailing social order. Those at the top of the social pyramid - the proud, the rich and the mighty - topple. They are stripped of their prestigious seats, dethroned, scattered and sent away empty. Meanwhile the poor and hungry, those at the bottom of the social hill, take a surprising ride to the top.

Good guys turn out to be bad guys. Those we expect to receive the reward get a spanking instead. Those who think they are headed for heaven land in hell. Things are reversed. Paradox, irony, and surprise permeate the teachings of Jesus. They flip our expectations. The least are the greatest. The immoral receive forgiveness and blessing. Adults become like children. The religious miss the heavenly banquet. The pious receive curses. Again and again, Jesus turns our world upside down."

When we look at the donkey of Jesus what we see is the picture of an extremely humble savior who came to save a humble people. As verse 5 in our text for today says, "Your king is coming to you humble and mounted on a donkey." The question it really forces us to face is are we willing to embrace Jesus as the king who rides a donkey?

Jesus did not promise His followers prosperity or prestige. Instead He promised something better, everlasting life in an everlasting kingdom. But it requires us to humble ourselves and embrace the humble king.

I wonder how God might want to humble our hearts today with the donkey? Are there areas in our lives and our hearts where we are grasping for and putting our hope in horses, thinking having the things the world esteems will save us and make us happy?

May God help us to trust in Him. As the Psalmist says in Psalm 20:6-7 “6 The Lord saves His anointed. 7 Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.”

Well, Jesus not only embraced the identity as the humble and poor savior, but He also shunned the way of power set before Him. Let’s talk about that for a few minutes in our next point, “A Weak Warrior.”

II. A Weak Warrior

Jesus knew that going into Jerusalem meant He was entering into a fight and He was ready for battle. But He entered in on a donkey, signaling that He would be fighting in a very different way.

A few different guys who hope to be messiah deliverers and topple Rome tried to wage battle with knives and war horses. They all lost, easily crushed by the mighty Roman empire.

The way of Jesus, the upside down way, was to lay aside human tactics and tools and instead to wage a war against the root of human pride and power by first showing us what it looks like to rely on the power and presence of God instead of our own strength. And the donkey says it all.

Sometimes we read these stories and I’m not sure whether we catch the picture or imagery there in the scene. So picture it and imagine it in your head.

Have you ever seen a full-grown man sitting on a donkey? It just looks funny. Because donkeys are smaller than horses it just looks awkward and actually doesn’t even work because a man’s feet can easily touch the ground when riding a donkey. To adjust for that if a man was going to ride a donkey he’d typically ride side saddle, which just makes the whole thing look even more awkward.

Jesus just looks weak in this scene. And that’s how He’ll look all week long until the very end. During the week His opponents try to goad Him into fighting but He simply shies away. The night before His arrest He spends time in prayer in a garden, feeling the weakness of His humanity so much so that in that low frailty He began to sweat drops of blood and said, “The Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak (Matthew 26:41).”

At His trial when they spew lies at Him, mocking and spitting on Him, He doesn’t even open His mouth opting to be thought of as guilty rather than speaking up for Himself and giving any defense. On the day of His crucifixion He’s beaten bloody, crowned as a king and then hung up on a cross to fight the final battle against death and instead of calling thousands of angels to His side to fight, which He said He could do, He gives up His last breath for His people.

The donkey is what kicks it all off. He rides in gently as the righteous one offering salvation and peace not parading His military command and ability to conquer all.

It's at this point that I'm not sure about what goes down. I'm sure at minimum the people were confused. They didn't expect nor want Him to be on a donkey. They'd been wanting Him to come to Jerusalem for years by this point to lead the revolt and He's saying the magic words, acknowledging that He's the Lord and King from the royal line of David. But He's on a donkey and a donkey that hadn't even ridden or broken in yet, a foal, a donkey you'd never risk putting the king on.

My best bet is they just think, "Oh well. Jesus is really into the Bible and must've taken this passage He quotes from the book of Zechariah super literally which is why He's riding a donkey. We'll get Him a horse later once the fighting starts."

And they give Him the royal treatment. Like San Diego Palm Trees were a national symbol of their city, often imprinted on the coins used in the exchange of money. They lay down palm branches and their coats on the road in front of the donkey as a sign of their acceptance and reception of Jesus as the rightful king.

Five days later this same crowd would turn on Him because He ended up just looking weak and powerless, not the mighty warrior they were expecting and wanting. The donkey then is a symbol of the true power of God, the ability to resist human pride and instead embrace weakness as the way of winning hearts.

In Kraybill's book he talks about this saying,

"Jesus rejected brute forces as the proper mode for governing others. The rules of political power sanctioned force, violence and bloodshed. Jesus rejected this right-side-up institution of coercive political power. He refused to play the game by the old rules."

From the Mount of Olives Jesus began His kingly decent into Jerusalem on a donkey. He was arrested a few days later because He didn't resist capture.

Jesus redefined the meaning of power when He refused to use force. It's hard to toss the lure of force aside...Jesus spoke of suffering as the new form of messianic power. The heroes of the upside-down kingdom are not warrior kings riding chariots with spears. The heroes of this kingdom are children and servants. These lowly servants carry the flagship of the servant regime. They operate not by the power of might and force but by the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit flowing down from the mountain of God."

1 Corinthians 1:28-31 in the Bible talks about this when it says, "28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. 30 And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

And then God just makes it really clear for us when He says in 2 Corinthians 12:9, “My power is made perfect in weakness.” Jesus on the donkey tells us He is the warrior who fights with weakness so that the power of God might be unleashed in us and among us.

Today I wonder how God might want to use Jesus’ donkey to highlight areas in our hearts and lives where we’ve been relying on our own human power and strength? Do you know what I’m talking about? Where we use the resources and time we have to try and make things happen, we try to make our life work, trying to force the result we want instead of letting go, being willing to be weak and trusting Him to work in us and through us because of it?

I don’t know about you but there’s times in my life where I find myself holding on just a little too tight and if I could put words to what I feel from God’s Spirit, God’s says to me something like, “I got this. Stop trying to maneuver and manipulate. Just look to me and trust me. I’ve got you. You’re my son. I love you and I’ll take care of you.”

God’s power is made perfect in weakness. So let’s follow Jesus on the donkey and instead of vying for power let’s pursue weakness for it in God will be seen and strong and good.

Well, I’ve got one last point for us today which comes straight out of our text, “A Beast of Burden.”

III. A Beast of Burden

Look with me at what the crowds say when Jesus is riding on the donkey walking over the palm branches and people’s coats. They say, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”

“Hosanna” is a word that simply means, “O save” and the name “Jesus” means “God saves.” So what’s going on here is you have a whole crowd of people crying out to Jesus saying, “Save us Son of David! Your name means God saves! Save us!”

The people were crying out for salvation from the tyranny of Rome. But Jesus heard a deeper cry, the cry the people’s heart that needed salvation from the tyranny of much crueler master, that of sin and death.

The donkey was called, “a beast of burden” because they were so commonly used to carry heavy loads with a heavy yoke upon their necks. When we see and understand the true purpose and mission of Jesus Christ upon entering Jerusalem, what we see is that there’s not a more fitting animal Jesus could’ve ridden. And therein lies the true and deeper reason Jesus the King was to ride a donkey.

There’s a weight all of us carry. The Bible calls it sin and death. Sin includes both our own faults and failures as well as the hurtful things others have said and done to us. In James 1:15 the Bible says what happens is, “Desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”

The death we experience is first a death in our spirits before it’s a death in our bodies. The way it feels

usually comes in the form of fear, guilt and/or shame.

When it's fear, we feel insecure about our future so we try to use our human power and resources to save ourselves in order to get the free and happy life we long for and we're afraid of honestly coming to God because of what He might think of us and skeptical that He can actually do anything for us.

When it's guilt, we feel our failures deeply and think God is just mad and disappointed with us like we've done too many things wrong and because of it there's no possible way He would or even could love us.

When it's shame, we feel like we are worthless and think we are simply not enough and never could be like there's something wrong with us deep down as though God made a mistake when He made us.

We carry these things and they eat us up from the inside out, ultimately killing not just our spirits but we know one day it will kill our bodies. So we have this looming threat hanging over us because we know we will die...and then what?

And this my friends is why Jesus came. He came to free us and deliver us from this burden. He came riding a beast of burden because His mission was to take all our burdens upon His shoulders.

His plan was to come on a poor humble donkey to save a poor and broken people. His plan was to come and do battle against the human temptations of pride and power and instead of fighting with weapons and words to lay His life down. His plan was to come and take all of our sin upon His shoulders, to take on all of our fear, guilt and shame then nail it to the cross!

Christianity is all about who Jesus is and what He did for us. It's not about us, us trying to live perfect lives or trying to make up for our faults and failures. We so easily make it about us doing the right things and being "good Christians" when that has nothing to do with Christianity. Jesus bore that burden for us so that we could be free, free to enter into the life of His kingdom which is a life of love, joy and peace in His Spirit with Him and His people.

Today, what weight are you carrying? What is weighing down your heart and life? Jesus wants to free you today. You don't have to carry what you're carrying anymore. You can give it to Jesus and let Him take care of it.

When we look to Jesus Christ, believing in Him as our Savior and King we're able to let go and be freed of our burdens. As He said in Matthew 11:28-30 "28 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Jesus really is the beautiful beast of burden, the true and better donkey.

Conclusion

Well, I hope you've enjoyed God's Word today and I pray that in and through it you've seen the

wonderful goodness of Jesus our Savior. He really is a lot better than the Shrek donkey!

One of the things I really like about our church is that we have a time of response before God each week in our service where we can literally respond to Jesus' invitation to come. We get up out of our seats and go to these tables where once again we give Jesus our burdens and receive His rest, His love and His peace as our Lord, Savior and King. We call it "communion" or the Lord's Supper where we take a piece of bread as Jesus' perfect life and we dip in the wine or the juice as His blood shed on the cross.