

“What About the Donkey?”

Reading: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Mark 11:1-11

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

One of the things that has always worried me about this story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem is this part about the donkey. There's apparently no arrangement ahead of time for Jesus to borrow the donkey, because He expects someone to ask the disciples where they think they're taking it, and that is indeed what happens. They're just supposed to answer that the Lord needs it, take it, and go on their way. That always kind of bothered me, but then as a child I always wanted my parents to mark my brother's toys with an 'S' for 'Seth' and my toys with an 'L' for 'Luke,' so apparently I've always been a little concerned with maintaining personal property boundaries. They just take the donkey and go, with very little explanation or apology, and without payment or even asking permission. Even today you wouldn't want someone just walking off with your donkey, since I'm sure they're not cheap, but back then they were especially valuable since your livestock was the basis for your wealth as well as what you used to stay alive. If you have a truck of some sort that you use for hauling equipment or cargo for your business, you probably wouldn't want someone coming out of the blue and taking it.

But this is not unplanned or accidental. Jesus was not simply tired of walking today, and decided that He'd rather ride. He's not just taking advantage of His celebrity or trying to put on a good show. He didn't have an image consultant advise Him that this would be a good publicity stunt. No, this was a theologically and politically calculated choice. Some of the other gospel accounts of this story mention the connection to certain ancient prophecies about the arrival of the Messiah riding a donkey into the city, and a lot of the imagery hearkens back to stories about the great King David riding into the city on a donkey as a sign of peace. So this event is a deliberate choice on Jesus' part to take on Himself these ancient expectations, to fill the role and claim the place of the Messiah that everyone has been longing for.

Still, though, what about the donkey? Is it okay that He basically just takes it? I mean, when you take someone else's stuff without permission or payment, don't we call that stealing? Even if He took it back later, and I assume He probably did, how did the donkey's owner know that He was just borrowing it? But again, this is a carefully calculated action by Jesus. Even today, there are circumstances in which someone can legally take your stuff without permission. The catch, of course, is that they have to have the authority to do so. The police or military can commandeer personal property in emergency situations, but they have the legal authority to do so and, hopefully, they've earned the moral authority for us to trust them and give our aid.

Jesus is relying on a similar idea. If you are the lord of a realm, you have the authority and the right to use the realm as you see fit. At least in theory, your lord basically owns the realm and everything in it, and you and your possessions are at the lord's disposal. If the lord of the land is traveling through and needs a place to stop for the night, you're going to drop whatever you're doing and give him your bed and your best hospitality. If the lord of the land picks a fight with the next lord over and tells you to fight for him, you grab whatever you've got and go to war. And if the lord of the land needs a donkey, the only thing you need to hear is that the lord has need of your donkey, and that's the end of the discussion.

So from the very start of this trip into Jerusalem, the point is that Jesus is declaring His rightful Lordship. The assumption is that He has the right to claim the authority to commandeer someone's donkey. The disciples are being granted the authority to act as His agents. And, rightly so, for whatever reason, this donkey's owner has enough insight to recognize that Jesus' claim to authority is legitimate. He doesn't argue or fight over it, because Jesus has the authority.

Over the last few weeks we've been spending time looking at the various covenants God has made with His people through the ages, and the assumption we had was that these covenants revealed something to us about God and His priorities. And that's true today, as well. Palm Sunday is the beginning of a climactic confrontation between Jesus and the forces opposed to Him. We celebrate, but we do so aware of where this palm-covered path is leading. This is a royal entry into the capital city, and a royal entry is one of those things that shows what the king's priorities are. It's sort of like a parade that we might have today: you have a parade for a reason, and you put certain people in the parade or certain types of floats in the parade because those are the sorts of things you're celebrating. The parade we have around here is the Memorial Day parade in Pocono Pines, and we put on parade our veterans and Scouts and firefighters, and some classic cars and other displays as well. Of course the focus is Memorial Day, but it's also a celebration of this community and its values.

There are ticker-tape parades held in Manhattan sometimes for great heroes, like the Apollo 11 astronauts or World War II generals, where we celebrate great accomplishments or victories. Or you can picture the huge military parades that you see on the news from North Korea or the Soviet Union, where perfect rows of soldiers are marching in perfect synchronization and huge missile trucks are parading past the great leader. You've got to hand it to the communists; they at least know how to put on an impressive parade. Their priority is to display their military and political power, both for the benefit of international audiences and their own people.

And that's true in the Bible, too. We might think of the creation story as a royal entry of God into His kingdom, as He surveys what He has made, puts it in order, pronounces judgment on it, and then takes up residence in it. Or in the Exodus story, after God has fought to free His people, He descends to Mt. Sinai with fire and thunder, and later He leads His people as a pillar of cloud or fire in their procession through the desert. Or when Solomon builds the Lord a temple in Jerusalem, the glory of God descends, and sacrifices are made, and blessings are pronounced upon the people. Or in John's Revelation, the Lord makes things right, casts out evil, He re-creates the world, and He brings His royal throne into the midst of His people.

So what does this royal entry into Jerusalem reveal to us today? Jesus has recently been predicting that He will be betrayed and handed over to the Romans and mocked and killed, and yet He willingly comes to Jerusalem anyway. He claims His Lordship and His rightful authority from the start with something as simple as commandeering a donkey. The donkey's owner is willing to accept His authority, even if the city's officials aren't. He rides into Jerusalem as a peaceful, triumphant king, in the midst of the excited crowds that have gathered for one of the biggest religious festivals of the year, and He accepts their shouts of praise and blessing. He heads directly toward the temple, the hub of religious worship, the center of so much political power, and the focal point of so many ancient promises of God's faithfulness and deliverance. Mark's gospel leaves out the story of Jesus overturning the tables of the money changers that some of the other gospel writers include at this

point and saves it for the next day. Instead, Mark simply says that He goes to the temple, looks around at everything, and then leaves the city because it's getting late.

And that's really the pattern He follows throughout the week. He comes into the city, He claims His authority as the rightful Lord, He surveys His realm and pronounces judgment on it, and He leaves it at that. He claims authority over this world, but He refuses to take up the power of this world. He challenges the rulers of the city, but He rejects their methods of exercising control. He comes not as a king conquering through violence, but as a king who already has the rightful authority over the land. So we have to wonder how much of that the crowds shouting 'Hosanna!' understand at this point. They're excited at the prospect of a change of regime, and they like the thought of a Messiah coming to save them. Who wouldn't? But before we join in with their shouts of praise, we'd better pay close attention to how this Messiah saves.

Imagine yourself standing on a sidewalk, watching a parade go past. What sorts of things get us cheering? What do we celebrate? Well, we tend to celebrate the sorts of things I mentioned before. At our ticker-tape parades, we cheer great accomplishments. We celebrate people who have dared things no one has dared before. At our military parades, we rejoice in victories won on our behalf. We value strength and prowess. At our Memorial Day parades, we honor those who have sacrificed greatly for us. We celebrate patriotism, and family, and the American spirit. At our Macy's Thanksgiving parade, we celebrate huge balloons, I guess? I'm not really clear on that one. But here standing alongside the procession into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, we're forced to examine what exactly we're cheering. Are we cheering what we want Jesus to be, or what He really is? Are we cheering the picture of Jesus we have in our heads, or the Jesus who is riding in front of us, claiming authority while heading to the cross?

Because it seems to me that one of the places the church has consistently gotten in trouble through the ages is when we join in the cheers without really paying attention to what we're cheering. We get into trouble when we cheer the power and authority of Jesus without accepting that His authority falls on *me*, too, and His power is not the sort of power we usually see used in our world. Or we get into trouble when we think that Jesus is just one more exhibition in the larger parade, and Jesus is blessing and participating in whatever else I'm celebrating. That may be true sometimes, but the values of our world and the values of God's kingdom don't always line up. Or we get into trouble when we cheer the parts of Jesus' ministry and teaching that we like, but we fail to place enough importance on the fact that He's heading straight for the cross, and the cross not only saves us from our sins, it also convicts our sins and reveals them for what they are. And this path He's riding on doesn't only save me by His blood, it also offers that same salvation to everyone in the world, whether I like them or think they're worthy or not. This Palm Sunday path invites them into the kingdom, too.

Jesus rides this donkey with the full authority of the king. He rides into His realm, and He surveys what He sees, and He pronounces judgment upon it as He claims His throne. And He claims His throne by using the power of God, while ignoring the power of our world. He confronted the evils of His time, and we can read those stories and cheer along with the crowds, but we have to realize that He also confronts our evil and the evil of our world, too. So we had better be ready to walk this path toward Easter. We had better be aware, as we cheer Jesus riding this donkey, that we know

what we're cheering for. We need to ask ourselves, as we stand here in these cheering throngs, whether we are merely part of the crowd, or are we emissaries of the king?

Take up your palm today, and cheer the coming of the king, fully aware that the world will lash out and the darkness will strike, and our king will be enthroned on a cross of torture and humiliation. If you take up a palm today, it is a pledge of allegiance to the coming kingdom.



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