

The Lord Needs Him
Laura Smith Conrad
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church
March 20, 2016 Palm C

Luke 19:28-40

19:28 After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

19:29 When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples,

19:30 saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here.

19:31 If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'"

19:32 So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them.

19:33 As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?"

19:34 They said, "The Lord needs it."

19:35 Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.

19:36 As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road.

19:37 As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen,

19:38 saying, (Raise arms)

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

19:39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop."

19:40 He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Philippians 2:5-11

2:5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

2:6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

2:7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,

2:8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.

2:9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,

2:10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

2:11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Proclamation of the Word

We call today "Palm Sunday" even though Luke's gospel mentions no palms. He does say they laid down their coats, but it would sound weird to call today "Coat Sunday or Jacket Sunday." Hosannas and palm branches are mentioned in the other three gospels, but not Luke's telling. What draws me in to this drama is the donkey. There are lots of details about acquiring the colt, the foal of a donkey.

I laughed remembering that one Palm Sunday in Fort Hill Church, I asked the PSA clown troop to help me with the story for children. I think some of you still have nightmares about clowns in worship. We acted out the

story of the parade into Jerusalem. Our donkey was Bobby Williamson, and our Jesus a rail thin house manager named David Beamguard. It all looked kind of silly. There were lots of giggles and our donkey even bucked a little. In an odd way it was truer than we intended it to be. Jesus is demonstrating his kingship. And from this drama of Palm/Coat Sunday we can tell that Jesus is a very different kind of king. Some of that has to do with his choice of riding a donkey into the city of Kings, Jerusalem.

You may know more about donkeys than I do, but this is what I have learned this week. With the help of the observations of the Rev. Dr. Janet Huntⁱ and others, I learned that some of my assumptions were flat out wrong.

First of all, I think of donkeys like mules as in "stubborn as a mule." I understand donkeys can be stubborn, but it comes from their drive for "self-preservation." They play it safe. This characteristic may be the reason Donkeys lead tours deep into the Grand Canyon rather than horses. They are safe, careful, preserving their own life and yours if you happen to be riding one down a steep, narrow decline. Rather than freak out, they freeze when they are afraid. They listen to their own fear and will not ride into a dangerous situation which makes them appear stubborn, when they are being smart. While stubborn in their own ways, apparently, once you earn their trust they will do most anything you ask of them. Donkeys have strong emotional bonds.

Secondly, most of us do not consider donkeys to be smart. Maybe folks of my generation have been heavily influenced with the Donkey in the movie *Shrek* too much. He is a sort of fool, comedian, appearing dumb, but an effective sidekick. Turns out, donkeys are smart animals.ⁱⁱ They can memorize routes and have great memories, remembering another animal they have not seen in years. They are great problem solvers, logical and flexible in their approach. Maybe church leaders, community and political leaders can learn something from donkeys.

Think of the biblical witness to donkeys and their purpose. The great King Solomon rode a donkey into Jerusalem for his coronation- a sign of kingly humility (see 1 Kings 1:32-37). Jesus rides into the royal city, but he will wear a different kind of crown and be mocked. It is fitting that the beast that carried Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem and brought Jesus into the world, would be the animal of choice to bring Jesus to his final days of life. Mary's suffering in childbirth would lead to new life. And Jesus' suffering in Jerusalem leads to new life for all the world.

Another thing I learned is that donkeys are animals who help the peasants of the world survive. With over 40 million donkeys living on the planet, 96% are in underdeveloped countries. They work to help draw water for thirst, to plow fields to raise food for the hungry. In one way they serve the least of these, and even Christ himself. As we read in Matthew 25, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink." Donkeys serve the poor.

Donkeys are sometimes used to ward off predator like foxes, wild dogs, and coyotes. Donkeys will bray a warning to the herd of cows or sheep to get them to safety, sometimes trampling the predator himself. How appropriate that the Good Shepherd who searches the lost sheep would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd. The Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (See John 10)

Jesus could have walked into Jerusalem that day. He usually did travel on foot. Perhaps he was fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah,

"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. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth." (Zechariah 9:9-10, NRSV)

Don't you think that is the kind of King the world needs?

Instead of walking it was key that Jesus ride on a donkey, an animal of peace not of war. He chose a donkey who serves with wisdom and calm rather than lashing out in fear. The animal that lays down his life for the vulnerable and serves the poor. Jesus chose the donkey who served with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love for his Master.

Jesus instructed the disciples that when the owner asked why they wanted his donkey, the disciples were instructed to say, "The Lord needs it" or as it is written in the old King James version, "The Lord hath need of him." Jesus is the kind of King the world needs. And the donkey is the kind of followers we need to be.

"The Lord hath need of Thee."

I was listening to a candidate for ministry Jimmy tell his story of being called into ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament. He said, it began with Miss Betty. Growing up in his home church, Miss Betty would ask him to serve even as a young person. And it was the way she approached him, whether to help with Bible School or to usher or to do mission, she would ask in a way that he could never say "No." She would say, "Jimmy, the Lord hath need of thee." It would be time for a work day at church, "The Lord hath need of thee, Jimmy." How could he tell the Lord "No" after all the Christ has done for us. So his service in the church began as a child, and his call to ministry is an extension of that early discipleship.

Maybe you know Miss Betty, too. She may look like Maggie or Dusty Oates, or Joanne Trenholm, or Amy Elrod, or Garland or Bob, but when asked to serve, remember "The Lord hath need of thee." Be the donkey. I know. A donkey is not something many of us aspire to be. But a donkey is what the lord has need of. And to serve in humility is the way of life and salvation and peace. In a world that asks, "What's in it for me?" We ask, "How can we serve? protect of the vulnerable? work for the poor? serve the one who came to die that we might live?" My friend Jan has signs all over her church and office which read,

"It's not about you. It is about growing the Kingdom of God." Following Jesus is about service above self. That's the question. How can we serve?

Our service is our way of praising God. When the Pharisees try to get Jesus to shush his disciples singing and praising God that first Coat Sunday, Jesus says if I shut them up, even the stones would cry out! Kathryn Huey reflectsⁱⁱⁱ,

despite our best calculations and precautions, all creation longs to participate in the drama of salvation. Even if you could get the disciples to quiet down, he says, the stones would shout out the good news, or, as

the wonderful preacher Fred Craddock puts it, just as stars can guide, lions and lambs can rest together, and in a few days, the earth can quake and the sun can go out at the worst moment of all.

All of creation is involved. Ironically, these worrywart Pharisees are the ones that now disappear from the story. This is their last appearance, this word of fear their last word, in the Gospel of Luke, before they step off the stage. In contrast, Jesus brings a word of peace.

Jesus rides courageously into danger, knowing the larger purposes for which he was born and to which he was called. He is leading his own funeral procession. The joy of that day was a happy hope, but Christians know that Joy comes through the suffering of a cross and self-less love. Faith-based joy is a miracle of grace, not fleeting like the crowds of palm Sunday looking for a powerful celebrity, but a joy that emerges while witnessing a bloody Jesus on a cross, our breath catching and tears streaming, and yet able to praise "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

And when it is all said and done, as Paul writes,

at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus does not do it for the glory. Jesus came as one who came to serve rather than be served, and as one who came to die and be raised that we might live through him.

So remember this week. The Lord Hath Need of Thee.

Be the donkey.

ⁱ Janet Hunt, "Humbled and riding on a donkey..." *Dancing with the Word*, April 9, 2014.

ⁱⁱ www.animalrahat.com/playful-smart-and-social-the-hidden-life-of-donkeys/

ⁱⁱⁱ Kathryn Huey, "Sermon Seeds" at www.ucc.org/weekly_seeds_into_jerusalem_1