

What's With the Donkey?
Mark 1:1-11

I. What's Up with the Donkey?
A. Palm Sunday Approaches

On this Palm Sunday morning in April 2020, we're going to turn our attention away from the distractions of the day to a scene outside the city of Jerusalem on the road that leads down from the Mount of Olives westward across the Kidron Valley and up the side of Mt. Zion to the Eastern Gate of the ancient city.

In our day of imposed Sabbath, coronavirus, social distancing and government stay at home/no travel orders, our streets are silent, our stores empty, our churches quiet. But that was not the case on the day Jesus came riding into Jerusalem just five days before his crucifixion. The city teemed with travelers from all over the world, Jews and Romans, citizens of the provinces of North Africa and Egypt, Greeks, and Cyrenes. There were residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, and Asia Minor along with Medes and Elamites. Cretan and Arabian, covenant born and proselytes flooded the old city of God for the annual passover celebration. It was wall to wall humanity, people everywhere.

Around the world today, preachers and pastors will draw attention to the biblical record of that day. Many preachers will note that this is one of the passages that appears in all four gospel narratives. They will remind their audiences that repetition in Scripture is evidence of importance. Some will pose the question, "Why does this account of Jesus' entry appear in all four gospels?"

Some will suggest an answer based on how each account fits into the theme and purpose of each gospel. Matthew wrote primarily to demonstrate to Jews that Jesus fulfilled the prophetic messianic expectation. He specifically notes that on this occasion Jesus fulfills a prophecy from Zechariah as part of his gospel. Mark records the event with no explanation because he has already given the purpose of the book in the opening verses: to set forth the evidence that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Luke appears to use Jesus' entry into Jerusalem to draw attention to the faithlessness of the Pharisees. On this occasion of joy and outpouring of praise, the Pharisees insisted Jesus silence the exuberance of the crowd singing His praises. John uses the account to underscore the fact that coming to faith in Jesus as the Messiah was a process for the disciples; they didn't really understand what was happening until later, after Jesus was glorified, after His resurrection from the dead.

Some today are preaching that this account of Jesus' entry means that Jesus should be revered as our rightful King. Others are pointing out that Jesus' return—Jesus, who according to Hebrews 1 is the radiance of God's glory—His return marks the return of the glory to the temple, a glory that abandoned the temple in the days of Ezekiel the prophet. Still others, focusing on Jesus' response to the Pharisees in John 12 will instruct God's people to personally proclaim the worthiness of

Jesus for praise. The shepherds will challenge the sheep to not let rocks do their ministry for them.

Most preachers today, I hope, will find a way to focus on Jesus and the need to rightly realize who He is and what our relationship to Him should be. And I plan to get there with you, this morning, but first, I want to look at one detail that is included to some degree or another in all four gospel accounts of Jesus' entry to Jerusalem. I've got this nagging question, and I want to ask, "What's up with the donkey?"

B. What's up with the donkey?

John barely mentions the donkey, but doesn't leave the animal out entirely. John just says that Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it (12:14) and then quotes Zechariah 9:9, ***Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt.*** Each of the other gospel writers mentions in some detail the presence of the donkey and how it came to be included in the event. Now listen, if repetition in the Bible is important, then why is a donkey mentioned in all four Palm Sunday narratives? What's up with the donkey?

II. The Donkey Has A Point

A. Jesus' Intentionality with the Donkey

The donkey is no extraneous detail added to the story to make it more realistic and believable. The donkey is important because Jesus makes it important. The donkey is an important part of what Jesus Himself is doing that day, in His entrance to Jerusalem.

Look closely at Mark's reporting here. **Mark 11:1-3 (ESV)** ¹ *Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, **Jesus sent** two of his disciples ² and said to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately.'"* Do you see what Jesus does? **Jesus sent** two disciples with explicit instructions. Jesus sent two disciples into a specific village on a specific errand to acquire a specific animal for a specific purpose.

"Jesus sent." Understand the implications of these two words. Jesus acts intentionally to accomplish a specific purpose. Jesus is in control of the scene. Jesus is not passive here. The disciples don't come to Jesus and say, "Hey boss, it's been a long walk and there's a lot of people in the road, how about we find you a cool ride for the final distance?" No. Jesus actively guides this entire scene for His purpose, including the acquisition of the donkey.

While we're at it, we might as well understand the counter-cultural and personally unusual work Jesus is doing. He masterfully directs the activity of the day. It was common for worshipers at passover to walk into the city rather than ride. Even the wealthy who could afford horses and carriages would walk in remembrance that when Israel left Egypt, they walked. Jesus is setting aside tradition, doing the opposite of what was expected and he does that very intentionally, in

full knowledge of what He is doing.

We should also take into account two other facets of Jesus' action here that were unusual for him. He walked everywhere. No where else in the gospels do we find Jesus riding or seeking a ride. And, no where else do we find Him doing what He is doing here: **intentionally drawing public attention to Himself**. In fact, often in Mark's gospel we find Jesus instructing people who have experienced healing or some other grace to tell no one about it. Demons are commanded to silence when dispelled from their victims. It almost seems like Jesus takes deliberate steps to keep His identity a secret . . . until now. And now **he is taking deliberate steps to make Himself the center of attention**.

Jesus who went quietly to the city for years intentionally, purposefully, pointedly makes a public spectacle of Himself by entering Jerusalem on a donkey of His own choosing. Why? What's up with the donkey?

B. The Prophecy Reveals the Point

If you are pointing to the prophecy from Zechariah and thinking that is the reason the donkey is in the story, you are headed in the right direction.

Remember, especially in the gospel of Mark, everything Jesus says and does is intended to support the fact that He is the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus is God's uniquely chosen and provided Savior who rescues God's people from the peril of sin. So, it is intriguing that Jesus, in choosing and riding the donkey, fulfills a specific prophecy related to the Christ, the Messiah. But that is only part of it. It is more important that as Jesus fulfills prophecy He furthers God's revealed plan of redemption and glory that was put in place before God ever created the world.

God announces His plan for creation in Habakkuk 2:14: ***For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*** Everything Jesus does, including choosing and riding the donkey, serves God's plan to express the fullness of His glory in the realm of creation. The question is, how? How does Christ's entry into Jerusalem seated on a donkey serve God's plan to fill the earth with the knowledge of His glory?

C. What Christ's Entry on the Donkey Reminds Of

There are four reminders for us in Christ's entry to Jerusalem on the donkey that day. **First, Jesus's entry on the donkey reminds us God has a plan.**

God's plan from before the creation of the world was to gather to Himself and give as a gift to the Son, a people who would love and honor and cherish and worship His beloved Son. God's plan was that the Son, so in love with His Father, would cherish the Father's plan and give His life to accomplish that plan for the Father's glory, even one day returning the gift to the Father as a gift of His own.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem riding a donkey of His choosing, the fulfilment of a prophecy given

centuries before highlights the fact that God has a plan for this world, for you, and for me, and for all those He chooses and calls and saves.

Second, Jesus' entry on the donkey reminds us that nothing can thwart God's plan. In the book of Job, Job proclaims a truth about God in the 42nd chapter that bears repeating. Job says. "***I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.***"

Remember in the days following Jesus' birth, wise men came from the east looking for Him in the Judean town of Bethlehem. They stopped in at Herod's palace for directions. Herod instructed the wise men to return when they had found the child and tell him where the child was so he could worship also, but he was lying through his teeth. He had no interest in worship. His heart, jealous, insecure, and afraid, was full of murder.

God told the wise men about Herod's plan and after they found Jesus they went back to their home by another way. Herod was furious. He sent soldiers to kill every male child two years old and younger in Bethlehem and the entire region. Behind the action of this sinful man was the intent of Satan to thwart the plan of God by murdering the Son of God before He could fulfill God's plan. It didn't work

Remember how Jesus, after He was baptized was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness? Remember how he was there without food for 40 days and Satan came to test Him, to tempt Him, to take advantage of Him and derail the Father's plan through the Son's disobedience? It didn't work.

Remember how, one night as Jesus was in a boat with His disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee a storm came up of such ferocity the disciples, capable sailors, feared for their lives. Jesus was sleeping in the bow of the boat and they woke him saying, "Master, carest thou not that we perish?" They were scared to death. But Jesus spoke to the storm and commanded, "Peace be still." The storm may well have been another attempt by the enemy to thwart God's plan by drowning Jesus along with His disciples. It didn't work.

The garden is coming up. Then the cross. Then the grave. Then silence. Then Sunday. No purpose of God can be thwarted. The day Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey He chose, for a purpose He chose, not passive but actively choosing to fulfill the Father's plan reminds us that no plan of God's can be thwarted.

Third, Jesus' entry on the donkey reminds us that God's plan includes redeemed human beings dwelling eternally in the presence of the glory. Jesus picked that donkey and rode it into Jerusalem to focus the attention of the world on Himself. Why? So that He would have their attention on Friday as He gave His life on the cross, and on Saturday as He lay silent in the grave, and on Sunday as He was raised from the dead by the power of the Spirit, and on every day since as the gospel is proclaimed by Spirit-filled people throughout history and around the world.

This is all about the cross and God's plan to offer His only begotten Son, perfect and sinless, as an acceptable sacrifice for the sins of the world. This is all about God pouring out on His

innocent Son the wrath and judgment the totality of every human sin deserves. This is about Jesus taking in His own flesh your sin, my sin, and giving Himself to the death we deserve, in order that through faith in Him we might find the forgiveness and eternal life we do not deserve.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey He chose, reminds us that He is heading the cross of His own will, that through His death, the Father's redemptive plan would be fulfilled, and there would be a people who would love and cherish and honor the Son and the Father in the presence of His glory forever.

Finally, Jesus' entry on the donkey reminds us that God's redemptive plan to fill the earth with the knowledge of His glory is worth living and dying for. When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus in the garden, after Judas betrayed Him, one of His disciples drew a sword as if to fight back. He told him to put it away saying, ***“Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?”*** In that moment Jesus makes clear to His disciples that the Father's plan is not only worth living for, but dying for as well. It is worth our whole life, our whole heart, our whole devotion.

Jesus could have skipped the donkey, the road to Jerusalem, the intentional turning of the public eye on Himself. He could have avoided the beating, the cross, the scoffing, the pain, the loss, the death, the darkness of the tomb. He never would have, but He could have. The Palm Sunday donkey reminds us that Jesus' heart was set on the Father's will and He so loved the Father, so loved the Father's glory, that eternity with the Father and the Father's chosen people was worth both His life and His death.

D. What's up with the donkey?

So, what's up with the donkey? The donkey highlights the Father's unbroken plan to rescue you from the penalty of sin and your lifelong fear of death. The donkey highlights the purpose of God to move you from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of His Son whom He loves. The donkey is present that morning not merely to bear the returning glory to the city of His heart, but to invite you to give your life and your death in faith to Jesus in faith and the fulfilment of the Father's plan for you.

This is not the first time God sends a donkey with a message, though that is story for another time. The question is, will you hear the message of the donkey today and give yourself in every way, in life, and even in death, to the saving, sanctifying, redeeming grace of God in Christ Jesus. Will you believe and trust in Him? Will you follow Him in devotion with your whole heart?

What's up with the donkey? You are. What will you do now?