

A SUBVERSIVE DONKEY RIDE

TEXT: Mark 11:1-11

This year's lectionary for Palm Sunday puts the focus on Mark's telling of the story and it takes him a paltry eleven verses to tell the tale. And, he spends *more than half* of those eleven verses detailing the odd procurement of Jesus' donkey. Why was this so important? Well, if you have recently read the Prophet Zechariah (haven't we all?) you might get a clue.

In Zechariah 9 we read "*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of 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 (Euphrates) to the ends of the earth.* All of this as he rides into Jerusalem on a lowly donkey. Or maybe a colt, or maybe the foal of a donkey. Or, if we take a look at the other Gospel accounts, perhaps on more than one of these beasts.

What, you say? More than one? Really? Well, if we were to read this story by Matthew's account, here's what we'd be told: *Now when they drew near Jerusalem, and came to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to me. And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them' and immediately he will send them."*

That sure sounds like two to me. But, you know, there is something more notable here than whether Jesus has joined the circus and is astride two donkeys – of different size as well. Those who challenge the Biblical accounts have been known to accuse Jesus of theft. Did he have some pre-arrangement with the owners of the donkey – or two animals – before he sent the disciples off to fetch them? Were the disciples such smooth talkers that they could just go up to a man's house, untie his donkeys and pass it

off that there was a need for them? It appears that after the disciples stated, “The Lord has need of them”, that the owners let the disciples take the donkeys. It looks like it was voluntary. Jesus certainly did not advocate stealing on this occasion, or any other. Remember, we are not told all of the facts in the story – the Bible is not obligated to fill in every detail of every event. If it did, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

So, why all the fuss about a donkey – or two donkeys? Or how those animals were procured? There must be greater considerations for this Palm Sunday story. Well, yes there are.

So let’s start with a little background of just what’s going on here. It’s Passover, and Jerusalem is crowded with celebrants who have come for this high point of the year. There was always excitement among the crowds, but something was different this year. You know how the buzz of the crowd expands when the word starts getting around that someone special is coming to the party (like “Elvis is in the house”). There have been rumors, stories, hushed conversations about this guy who is said to not only heal illness and exorcise demons, but he has even brought that fellow from Bethany back to life. They may not have known much about him, but Jesus was at least a curiosity and rumor had it that he was even being heralded as a new king – a new ruler – a top gun.

And the excitement did not escape the disciples as they followed Jesus down the road from Bethany. Despite the fact that Jesus has been telling his band of followers, who had been with him from Galilee, what to expect when they arrive in Jerusalem: arrest, sentencing, torture, death – and a surprise resurrection, they showed an amazing lack of comprehension. James and John were still arguing about who should sit at his right hand when he “enters his glory”.

So, wouldn’t you expect that someone with this notoriety would come into the city riding a stately stallion, waving to all the worshipers, throwing sweets to the children, acknowledging the cheers and shouts of “Hosanna!”? On a horse, he might be

seen above the crowds. But there is no horse and no chariot – only a borrowed beast of burden that had never been broken. If Jesus is the one to restore King David’s throne, he chooses a strange mode of entry into the capital city, and an even stranger approach – coming from the Mount of Olives to the east instead of the normal processional route of the military parades.

Jesus’ ride was an enacted parable – a street theater that dramatized his subversive mission and message. George Caird, an Oxford scholar, characterized Jesus’ triumphal entry as more of a “planned political demonstration” than the religious celebration that we enact today.

Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem was an unmistakable political act. What was more significant than his ride was where he was headed. Jesus was headed for the temple. He went to the temple not to confront the titular “powers that be” but just to “look it over”. He returned the next day, according to Mark, to cleanse it of those things that kept it from being “a house of prayer for all nations”. It was this act that stirred the religious leaders to seek his death. Jesus had confronted them because “without true worship of God, there is no way,” according to Hebrews, “what a true politics might be”.

Jesus’ parade into the city was a strange sight. More typical was another entrance into Jerusalem by a military spectacle. It heralded the arrival of Pilate, the Roman Governor. In contrast to the lowly donkey ride, it included cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles. Instead of shouts of “Hosanna”, the people heard the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, and the beating of drums.

But Jesus ignored the pomp and pageantry of the Roman armies. He calmly carried out his subversive donkey ride, openly mocking the power of the Roman Empire. As the Roman army was cheered on with shouts of defiance and power, Jesus calmly rode on the back of a borrowed donkey, with open affection and support, Instead of

riding a fine horse and in an array of military garments, Jesus sat on a level with the people in a manner that would clearly be interpreted as a messianic act.

Jesus knew the risks of entering Jerusalem, but still he went. He knew that his message was a threat both to Rome and to the collaborators running the Temple. But Jesus also knew that God had called him to be a teacher and a prophet and from that challenge he could not simply walk away. So, with the full knowledge of the risk he was taking, Jesus organized a procession into Jerusalem that was contemptible of the Romans, a powerful symbol of hope to the Jewish masses living under occupation, and a danger to those religious authorities who had abandoned their loyalty to God in favor of Rome.

Jesus' triumphal entry into the clogged streets of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday was a deeply ironic, highly symbolic and deliberately provocative act. It was an act of street theater that dramatized his subversive mission and message. He didn't ride a donkey because he was too tired to walk or because he wanted a good view of the crowd. His triumphal entry was more of a planned political demonstration than the religious celebration that we enact today. He upset the status quo of political oppression that marginalized ordinary people, economic exploitation whereby the rich take advantage of the poor, and the religious legitimization that "God wants things this way".

On Palm Sunday Jesus invites us to join his subversive counter-procession into all the world. But he calls us not to just any subversion, subversion for its own sake, or to some new and improved political agenda. A Christian subversion takes as its model Jesus himself.

This is the Jesus whose parade we celebrate today. This is the Jesus whom we chose to come riding gloriously on the back of a borrowed donkey. This is the Jesus whom we greet with palm branches and our loyalty. This is the Jesus whose subversive donkey ride denotes peace, humility, and the opportunity for a new life in God.

It really does not matter how many donkeys were in his parade, or what method Jesus or the disciples used to obtain these mounts. What matters is that we today know, better than those who watched him that day, who he is and what his kingdom looks like. It's very easy for us to cast Jesus into a role of our choosing, however. We still would like to see him come to champion our hopes and expectations and to disrupt and frustrate the designs of our enemies. Jesus leads us to the Temple, though, and points us to a God who upends all our notions of power and rule.

On Palm Sunday Jesus invites us to join his subversive counter-procession into all the world. But he calls us not to just any subversion, subversion for its own sake, or to some new and improved political agenda. Christian subversion takes as its model Jesus himself. This is the Jesus whose parade we celebrate today. This is the Jesus who chose to come riding gloriously on the back of a borrowed donkey. This is the Jesus who we greet with palm branches and our loyalty. This is the Jesus whose subversive donkey ride denotes peace, humility and the opportunity for a new life in God. Amen.