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Matthew 21:1-11

Easter: Ode to a Donkey

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Today is Palm Sunday, the day the church celebrates Jesus' triumphant entry into the city of Jerusalem, only to be crucified by the end of the week. There's one character in the story of Jesus' ride into town that has just captured my imagination. This character shares the spotlight with Jesus, but I don't think we give him or her enough time. Can you guess who I'm talking about?... The donkey!

I was reading a book for my Doctorate of Ministry that talked about the donkey, and what the author said captured my imagination. Out of that came a deep dive into the story of the donkey in the Bible. So out of that research I want to share with you my *Ode to a Donkey* today. And maybe you're wondering, "Why should I care about a donkey? Why are you so interested in donkeys?"

Donkeys are amazing. Haven't you heard of Dominick the Italian Christmas Donkey who carried gifts for Santa "Because the reindeer cannot climb the hills of Italy?" Or maybe you've sung the Christmas Song, "What Child is this?" that sings of "Where ox and donkeys are feeding?" That's the polite version. Maybe you prefer to watch Shrek and Donkey? "You might have seen a housefly. Maybe even a super-fly. But I bet you ain't never seen a donkey fly!" And if you don't know what that means, you'll have to watch Shrek.

Can you think of any Bible stories that have a donkey in them? Mary, Joseph, and the birth of Jesus, right? Wrong! The Bible doesn't say there was a donkey there. There's a Christmas song called "Jog Along Little Donkey" and it's complete propaganda, fake news! We have to go much further back for donkey's major entry into the story, back to the first book of the Bible. If you're not paying attention, you might miss him.

Genesis 22:1-3 (ESV)

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 2 He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." 3 So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.

Do you all remember the story? Abraham didn't have a child till he turned a 100 years old. He didn't think he and his wife could have one, but God gave them their precious baby boy Isaac. But then God tests Abraham. He tells him to go and sacrifice his son, and Abraham obeys. But let's stop and notice the donkey's place in the story. The donkey isn't the sacrifice, but he makes sure the wood or Isaac or even Abraham get to the place of sacrifice. A typical donkey can carry about 125 pounds. If a donkey colt could carry Jesus, it could have carried Isaac. Then Abraham places the wood on his son, like a cross, to carry it up mount Moriah.

I also don't want us to miss something special. Mount Moriah, the place Abraham nearly offers his son, is the place where the temple would be built. Mount Moriah is Jerusalem, the mountain Jesus rode up to on his triumphant entry. So just like when Abraham's donkey carried the wood for the sacrifice to the future home of Jerusalem, the donkey at the triumphant entry is carrying another sacrifice, this time the true and final sacrifice, to the same exact city, with calvary just outside its walls. God provides a ram to save Isaac, and he provides the lamb of God to save us.

I've created a list of **five things I love about donkeys**. This is the first one.

1) Donkeys can carry heavy burdens.

When people think of donkeys, they think of something sturdy, that can carry a burden. That's why they call donkeys "beasts of burden." And in the opening pages of Genesis we find a donkey, carrying a burden, foreshadowing that one day one of his great-great-great-great grand-donkeys would carry another burden, a pure and holy sacrifice, a much heavier load, the savior of the world. The donkey is caring Christ Jesus, the final offering for our sins that makes forgiveness possible. 1) Donkeys can carry heavy burdens and...

2) Donkeys are faithful even when frightened.

If you've seen Shrek, you probably don't think donkeys are faithful when frightened, but they are. In fact, in Shrek 2, Donkey tries to comfort Shrek. When Shrek is on the run from trouble, Donkey says, "Don't worry. Things seem bad because it's dark and rainy and Fiona's father hired a sleazy hitman to whack you. It'll be better in the morning." Donkeys are beasts of comfort.

If we look at our story today, while Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey takes place in all four gospels, Matthew's account is the only one that takes note of the donkey's mother coming with them (Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-38; John 12:12-19). So what we realize is that Jesus' donkey isn't just any donkey, it's a colt that's less than 3-4 years old, and has never been ridden. Jesus is about to take this colt through a crowd of cheering people waving palm branches, and walking over cloaks so he can't see the ground. So they bring the mother, to try and calm the colt. But what we find is that this donkey is faithful, even when frightened. If I were a donkey, that's the kind of donkey I would want to be. You can pray this week, "Lord, would I be faithful even when I'm scared. Would I be a donkey?"

Apparently when donkeys stop, it's because "donkeys are safety conscious," which makes them good trail partners. They may see something is wrong before their riders do. We actually see this to be true in Numbers 22, the story of Balaam's donkey. This is one of Elijah's favorite Bible stories right now.

There was once a man named Balaam who a very bad king wanted to hire to curse the children of God, the Israelites. That means the king was being a "bully goat" and wanted to hire Balaam to be a "bully goat" too. At first Balaam didn't curse the Israelites because God didn't want him too. Then Balaam made a bad decision. He chose to disobey God and go with the bad king to curse the Israelites. This made God very angry, and he sent an angel to punish Balaam for what he had done.

Balaam was riding a donkey. The donkey saw the angel standing in the road ready to kill Balaam, but Balaam did not see the angel. The donkey said "Hee Haw!" and turned away from the road and went into a field. Balaam struck the donkey because he did not know why the donkey had turned aside. Balaam was being a bully goat to the donkey. The angel of the Lord stood in the path again and the donkey said, "Hee Haw! Hee haw!" and turned aside a second time. Balaam hit the donkey again. He was not being nice. He was disobeying God. The donkey saw the angel a third time, and there was no way to turn to the right or the left. "Hee haw! Hee haw!" This time the donkey lay down instead of carrying Balaam to his death. Balaam was so angry he hit the donkey with his staff.

Then God opened the mouth of the donkey and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" A talking donkey, Balaam! But Balaam didn't care. He told his donkey he wished he could have a sword so he could kill him. Balaam? A talking donkey! So the donkey asked, "Haven't I been a good donkey all your life? Do I normally treat you this way?" Donkey is going easy on Balaam and he finally get's it. Then God opened Balaam's eyes and he saw the angel that almost killed him. Balaam fell on his face and said he was sorry.

Balaam's donkey saved Balaam at cost to himself. Three times Balaam wounded the donkey, three times the donkey saved Balaam's life. He bore the wounds so that Balaam might live. The donkey took Balaam's curses so that Balaam wouldn't take God's curse. Balaam's donkey is a Christ figure. Balaam's donkey points forward to Jesus who takes our wounds so that we don't have to. He bears God's curse, so that we can fall on our faces and say we're sorry to God.

So why do I love donkeys? 1) Donkeys can carry heavy burdens. 2) Donkeys are faithful even when frightened (or Balaam's donkey is a Christ figure), and...

3) Donkeys are symbols of rescue.

I know we haven't gotten very far in this donkey history, but I want to take us back to Genesis again. There were three patriarchs of Israel, Abraham, his son Isaac, and his son Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons, and when he was lying on his death bed, he blessed each one. Those twelve sons became the twelve tribes of Israel. As he blessed each one, he gave them each a special blessing. Jacob gave a royal blessing to Judah, promising that the kings of Israel would come from his line.

Genesis 49:10-11 (ESV)

The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until tribute comes to him;
and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.
Binding his foal to the vine
and his donkey's colt to the choice vine,
he has washed his garments in wine
and his vesture in the blood of grapes.

Jacob promises that one of Judah's descendants is going to be king, and under his reign his people will flourish. They will bring in such fruitful harvests that there will be no place to tie your donkey but to a vine branch, overflowing abundance. But even as he promises this abundance, he promises that the king will wash his garments in the "blood of grapes." That word for blood doesn't normally mean juice. It means blood. Jacob his promises that through Judah will come someone, with a donkey, who will wash his garments in blood. This reminds us of not only the crucifixion, but the last supper as he took the wine cup and drank, associating his body with the blood of grapes (Luke 22:14-23). Donkeys are symbols of rescue.

This is a more common theme than you might expect. You might remember Samson, one of the Old Testament judges. The Spirit of God rushed upon him and he took a jawbone of a donkey and struck down a 1,000 Philistines, the enemies of Israel to rescue Israel (Judges 15:14-17). Donkey to the rescue!

In 1 Samuel 25, when a foolish man named Nabal verbally assaulted David, the future king of Israel, his wife Abigail saved his life by loading her donkeys with grain and raisins and figs and taking them to David. The donkeys helped save both David and Nabal's lives (see also 2 Samuel 16:1-4). Donkey to the rescue!

Of course, when Nabal realized what he'd done, he had a heart attack and died. And then donkey brought Abigail to David and they got married. So not only is donkey a symbol of rescue, but a symbol of love, and matchmaking. Husbands, give your wives a donkey figurine for date night or Valentines Day. She'll love it. Super romantic. There's nothing donkeys can't do.

So why do I love donkeys? 1) Donkeys can carry heavy burdens. 2) Donkeys are faithful even when frightened (or Balaam's donkey is a Christ figure). 3) Donkeys are symbols of rescue (love too).

4) Donkeys are a (surprising) sign of royalty.

When king David is dying, he declares his son Solomon king. To show he was king, a priest, a prophet, and a commander of his army place Solomon on one of king David's mules, which is essentially a donkey.

1 Kings 1:38-39 (ESV)

38 So Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, and the Cherethites and the Pelethites went down and had Solomon ride on King David's mule and brought him to Gihon. 39 There Zadok the priest took the horn of oil from the tent and anointed Solomon. Then they blew the trumpet, and all the people said, "Long live King Solomon!"

This is amazing and surprising because donkeys weren't really symbols of power. They were symbols of strength, hard work, but also humility. No one rides they're donkey around to impress others. This is why it's especially surprising when the prophet Zechariah, prophesies that Israel's final king will enter Jerusalem riding a colt, a young donkey.

Zechariah 9:9 (ESV)

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you;
righteous and having salvation is he,
humble and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem that day, if he really wanted to make a statement, he could have ridden in on a war horse. In *Shrek 2*, Donkey actually turns into a stallion. That's the kind of vehicle you'd expect to ride into town on if you were proclaiming yourself king. And make no mistake, Jesus could have walked into Jerusalem. He walked everywhere he went. No one else is riding a horse. Pilgrims were supposed to walk to Jerusalem for passover. But Jesus is purposefully making a show of it. By riding into Jerusalem on a donkey he is publicly claiming to be king in the line of David, yet a humble king.

World leader's today travel much differently to show their power.

- The North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un likes to ride a "a bulletproof train stocked with wine and cheese" that goes a full "37 MPH."
- Vladimir Putin likes to ride shirtless on a horse to show his power and might.
- Our American Presidents have "Air Force One. Marine One. Armored Limos." (Thou Shalt Not Be a Jerk by Eugene Cho)

What's so surprising about the donkey is it's none of these things. The donkey is humble, meek, stubborn, and kind. What we love about donkeys in the Bible is who they point to. It's not really about the donkey, but Jesus. Jesus' vehicle of choice tells us about the kind of king he is, humble, meek, stubborn, and kind.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem to the cheers of his disciples. They were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" Hosanna means "Save us now!" They understood Jesus was a king, but they didn't understand what kind of king he was. They still wanted an Air Force One Jesus, someone to keep them safe and secure. Palm branches were like their national flag, symbols of Jewish patriotism. But instead, Jesus gave them donkey Jesus, humble king, rescuer of all.

So what kind of king have you been making Jesus into? One that looks like he belongs on Marine One or riding a horse shirtless? He wants to upturn your expectation. Jesus does not ride into Jerusalem to rule, but to die. The donkey is kinda like Jesus and Jesus is kinda like the donkey, a humble servant.

Five things I love about donkeys: 1) Donkeys can carry heavy burdens. 2) Donkeys are faithful even when frightened. 3) Donkeys are symbols of rescue. 4) Donkeys are a sign of (humble) royalty. And...

5) If a donkey can point to Jesus and serve him, we can too.

I don't want you to walk away singing an ode to donkeys from this sermon, but an ode to Jesus instead.

- 1) A donkey can carry a heavy burden, but Jesus carried the heaviest burden of all, the wrath of God and the sins of the world to give us eternal life.
- 2) Jesus was faithful, all the way to the cross, even when he felt deep anguish at what was about to happen (Luke 22:42).
- 3) Jesus is our rescuer.
- 4) Jesus is the king, donkey just carries him up the hill to become a sacrifice for us.

Our donkey points to Jesus and serves him, so we can too. That's what I'm doing too. I'm a donkey, pointing to Jesus, trying to serve him, asking you to love him, worship him, serve him too. So here's the take away.

Be a donkey.

You might be just the kind of donkey Jesus can use. Do you hold a lot on your shoulders? Are you easily frightened? You sound like the perfect donkey for Jesus. If donkeys are symbols of rescue, who might you bear Christ, the rescuer, too?

Maybe you think, "Jesus could never use me." Well, if a donkey's jawbone in Samson's hands became a symbol of deliverance, God can use you. You're in much better hands than Samson's. You're in Christ's hands. And can take you and wield you for his glory if you'll let him. God can do a lot with a donkey in the right hands, in his hands.

And you know what, even if you're that other word for donkey... God can still use you. I know this because he uses me. So let me leave you with this. Be a donkey for Jesus. Whatever he asks of you, go, go and carry the king. *Be a donkey.* Let's pray.

Proverbs 3:5-6

Trust in the Lord with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your paths straight. (NIV)

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon, which includes endnotes and references. Read [our story here](#).

Sources:

Eugene Cho, *Thou Shalt Not Be a Jerk: a Christian's Guide to Engaging Politics*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2020, Kindle.

Nicky Ellis, “How Much Weight Can a Donkey Carry?” Farm & Animals, December 2, 2019, accessed March 18, 2021 <https://farmandanimals.com/how-much-weight-can-a-donkey-carry/>.