

Donkeys, Disciples and Dirt

Luke 19:28-40

Palm Sunday, March 29, 2015

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~What God-honouring thing can donkeys, disciples and dirt have in common that good religious people often lack?~

If you've been with us over the last couple months you know that we are in the middle of a series through Paul's letter to the church in Colossae. But we are going to be taking a two week break from that because Easter is upon us and today is Palm Sunday.

Now Palm Sunday is the name given to the first day of the last week of Jesus' natural life on earth. By Friday of this week Jesus will have been betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter and crucified by Pilot.

As a side note, if you are able I hope you will plan on attending our Good Friday service here at the church at 10:30. But today is Palm Sunday, Friday is still six days away and Palm Sunday has its own share of ups and downs.

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So would you please turn with me to Luke chapter 19? You will find this on page 743 if you are using a pew Bible.

Now Jesus' "Triumphal Entry" is a story full of deep insight intermingled with varying levels of misunderstanding. The deep insight came as some recognized Jesus as the promised Messiah, and served and worshipped Him appropriately. Luke 19:38 gives us the words of the crowd as they shouted:

[Read Luke 19:38]

This is a quote from Psalm 118, a prophecy of the coming Messiah written by David. And these are the words hundreds of people used to worship Jesus. They finally got it, at least in some part. Jesus was God's promised Messiah.

But there were others in the crowd who saw the same situation and misunderstood everything. And we get this in the very next verse, verse 39. It reads:

[Read Luke 19:39]

Instead of perceiving that Jesus was the Messiah and worthy of the highest praise, the Pharisees perceived that in receiving this praise Jesus was actually proving He was a heretic from the devil. And so just a couple verses later Luke tells us:

Every day [Jesus] was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill Him. (Luke 19:47)

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Now this might seem extreme, but this is always what happens when God moves among us. Some with eyes of faith see Him moving, respond by pouring their lives out in service and worship, and others don't see God moving at all, miss everything, and ultimately become God's enemies.

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So with that as an introduction would you please stand and pray with me this morning. And let's ask God for the one thing that separates these two groups, eyes of faith to see what He is doing.

[Pray]

Our text today starts with Jesus on Mission. Look at verse 28.

[Read Luke 19:28-30]

Now Bethany and Bethphage, where this text starts make up a small community on the Mount of Olives. And the Mount of Olives is right beside the temple mount that Jerusalem is built upon. So from here Jesus had a great view of the city. And Jesus knew He had arrived at His destination.

Now to arrive at a destination means you have to be on a journey, and Jesus was – in fact He was on a mission. 10 chapters earlier Luke tells us:

As the time approached for Him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51)

Jesus fixed His eyes on Jerusalem and He knew what this city held for Him. He knew He was going to die as the perfect Passover Lamb delivering sinful humanity from the wrath of God. And so you can imagine with this on His mind how difficult this journey would have been.

I mean when other prophets, think Jonah, received a call to something they didn't like they turned and ran. But Jesus wasn't interested in avoiding God's mission. He knew He had come for this reason, and so He had set out from Bethsaida in Galilee where most of His ministry had taken place, with the goal of arriving in Jerusalem at Passover.¹

But Jesus' mission wasn't only to die, but to live, and to fill His surroundings with the presence of God in every way He could. The journey was just as important as the destination for Jesus.

¹ Mark 8:22

Now some of us have a hard time with that and I'm one of them. When I head out on a road trip I want to get there. As a kid I can remember being frustrated to death during trips to see grandparents in Vancouver and Kelowna, by my dad's desire to stop and check out as many of the points of interest along the way as possible. I mean other than a nice plaque on the side of the road and being the highest point on the highway what's Begbie's Summit to look at? I just wanted to get there! But perhaps Jesus would have appreciated traveling with my dad more than with me.

Ministry happened for Jesus on the way to fulfill His mission. Every day Jesus did the work of His Father whether He was going somewhere or not. And every day Jesus saw the Father at work in His world. Jesus lived by faith.

So Jesus set out for Jerusalem, but as He was passing the outskirts of Samaria He met a community of lepers. Now Jews didn't associate with Samaritans, and nobody spent any time with lepers. But Jesus wasn't too holy or too busy to do the Father's work and so even though He had somewhere to go He stopped to heal 10. And you remember the story, one returned to thank Him.²

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Then just 30 Km away from Jerusalem Jesus spent time in Jericho. There He healed Blind Bartimaeus and had lunch with Zacchaeus the transformed tax collector. And then, when the time was right, He set off for Bethany.

Now Luke doesn't give us the details of His stay in Bethany, but John does. In Bethany Jesus spent time with His friends Mary and Martha. And if you know that story you know that these sisters had a brother named Lazarus who was dead when Jesus arrived.³ Now Lazarus hadn't been dead long, in fact when Lazarus got sick the sisters sent word to Jesus knowing He was only a few kilometers away, and asked Him to come quickly, but Jesus hadn't rushed.

Jesus, like Gandalf, always arrived precisely when He meant to – He was never late. His mission, not the need around Him, dictated His actions. And so Jesus showed up when He did because He had no intention of healing Lazarus, He planned to bring him back from the dead. And that is what He did a week before our text today.

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Now these are just a few highlights of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. In reality God worked through Jesus every day of His life because Jesus had perfect eyes which enabled Him to see God perfectly. And when we see God at work we can participate with what He is doing. And the people saw Jesus and took notice.

And so by the time He arrived in Bethany people from all over the country had heard about Him and were eager to meet Him face to face during the Passover celebrations.

² Luke 17:11-19

³ John 11

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And this is where our text picks up. Jesus is just about to head out of Bethany, through the Kidron Valley, and then up into Jerusalem. And here He does something intentional. He sends His disciples to get Him a donkey, a colt to ride on.

Now this is unusual for Jesus. Jesus never rides anything ever – He always walks. But here He makes a request for a donkey, why? If He really wanted to ride something why not ride a horse? After all Jesus was arriving in Jerusalem as the coming King. And kings rode horses... especially when they were on a mission.

But Jesus wasn't on an earthly king's kind of mission. And this is important. Even though Jesus was about to claim victory over the forces of darkness and death, His victory would come not by the might of the sword but through the power of submission. And so Jesus rode something that gave this picture.

Now while most of the time kings rode horses, if a king was to enter a city in humility he would ride a donkey. But have you ever heard of a humble king? So you can imagine how many times in history a king voluntarily took this position – it never happened. If a king was riding a donkey it was in shame after being defeated.

But Jesus hadn't been defeated. Jesus was being kingly in a way no one had ever thought possible. And in so doing He fulfilled the words of Zechariah who wrote some 475 years earlier. He prophesied:

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
 Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
 See, your king comes to you,
 righteous and victorious,
 lowly and riding on a donkey,
 on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9)

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Now here we come across something interesting, and the first way that donkeys, disciples and dirt can similarly honour God.

Luke tells us that the colt Jesus chose had never been ridden before. Now why would Jesus ride a wild donkey into Jerusalem? I don't know if you know anything about riding wild animals, but I once watched a cowboy break a horse and it was a job I wasn't interested in taking on. So what's the point here?

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It's Palm Sunday and Jesus is entering Jerusalem as God's Messiah, and it is a donkey who sees it first.

Now Luke tells us nothing more than that this colt had never been ridden. He doesn't tell us of Jesus wrestling it into submission or somehow training it, because of course that doesn't happen. Instead while this donkey is wild, somehow upon encountering Jesus it recognizes the Master and submits. It had eyes to see and responded correctly.

Now Jesus has demonstrated His dominion over creation before. He's walked on water and restored crippled limbs. But this is a little different. Here a living creature with a will of its own submits to serve the Master.

And this isn't the only story in the Bible about a donkey with eyes to see. In the book of Numbers we read the comical account of the prophet Balaam. Now prophets are supposed to have deep insight and great ability to see the hand of God. Right?

But Balaam was so spiritually blind and so mute he couldn't see or speak for God if he tried. While he was a prophet of YHWH it turned out he was no better than the idols of Israel's enemies who were also blind and mute. And just to accentuate the foolishness of this situation God enabled Balaam's donkey to see and speak for him.⁴ Now every Jew knew this story and laughed every time they heard it but they never imagined they would become as blind as Balaam.

But the irony is this was exactly what was happening again. Jesus' donkey saw God at work and submitted to carry the Master while the holy city Jerusalem and all its good religious people were so blind they were actually plotting to kill God.

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Now the point of both these stories is not that donkeys are intelligent or perceptive beasts – please don't hear that, they aren't! The point is that what separates a disciple from an enemy of Christ is not how smart you are or how long you have been religious, but whether you have eyes to see God at work.

And God is the one who gives these eyes. Obviously Balaam's and Jesus' donkeys had no natural ability to see God, in fact it is ludicrous to claim they really had any understanding at all – they were only enabled to see what God enabled them to see. God opened their eyes.

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And this brings us to the second picture of how donkeys, disciples and dirt can similarly honour God. Look down at verse 37

[Read Luke 19:37-38]

Now most of this crowd was enraptured with Jesus. Matthew tells us they were spreading their coats and palm branches on the ground. This was "red carpet" treatment, a royal welcome for a victorious king.

⁴ Numbers 22:21-39

Tradition actually tells us that waving a palm branch in first century Israel was the equivalent to waving the flag of rebellion against Rome. This is something the Maccabees had brought in about a hundred years earlier. And the people had high, high hopes in this moment. And why shouldn't they.

After all they've been with Jesus. Notice how Luke describes this crowd in verse 37. They are a crowd of disciples. Now this isn't just the 12, these are hundreds or perhaps thousands of people who have been with Jesus and heard of Jesus and are following Jesus – they're disciples.

They knew He was a miracle worker and He had blown their minds. He cured lepers. He made the blind see, He unstopped the ears of the deaf, He strengthened the legs of the lame. He commanded demons to depart. He calmed storms and walked on water. He fed thousands with a boy's lunch and He had brought Lazarus back from the dead.

And so as He rode into Jerusalem – King David's city – they knew nothing could stop Him. Jesus could just speak and Pilate would crumble, Herod would bow and ultimately even Caesar would not be able to stand before Him. Jesus was sovereign and they put their faith in Him.

And so they cried out: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

Now these are messianic words. And the people know what they are saying. They knew what Isaiah said about the Messiah, and they couldn't wait for it to happen. Isaiah prophesied:

Of the greatness of His government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this. (Isaiah 9:7)

And the people knew Jesus was the fulfillment of this prophecy and they were excited about it. They saw the LORD Almighty on the move, they recognized His finger prints, and so they did what disciples do: they responded in worship, and Jesus received their worship.

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Now sitting on this side of the last 2000 years we know that their hopes were slightly misdirected. They weren't wrong that Jesus was the Messiah. They weren't wrong to attribute praise and worship to His name and fall at His feet. But we know His kingdom wasn't going to be a kingdom of bricks and stone like

they were expecting, it was going to be a spiritual kingdom. Even Jesus' closest disciples wouldn't get their mind around that for a bit more than a week.

And yet Jesus doesn't get off His donkey and correct them. He doesn't say "stop worshipping, you don't have Me totally figured out and you are getting it wrong. Come back when you actually see what God is doing and then worship Me.

He doesn't say that. Instead He receives their worship, and accepts them as the disciples they are.

Now there is good news here for us. When it comes to seeing God at work in our lives the good news is we don't have to have everything about God figured out. We don't have to be right all the time with when we turn our attention to what God is up to in our city and at our church. We don't have to worry about making mistakes.

What matters with donkeys and disciples is that we have eyes of faith to see God on the move, and hearts ready to stoop to serve and worship.

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This last week was our NAB joint church conference "Cultivate", and quite a few of you were able to make it out to hear Cam. I was really challenged and encouraged by many things he unpacked for us, and I expect you were as well.

One of the things that stands out to me was the story he told of his church, and their disciplining themselves to see God at work in their midst. Everyone who joins their church agrees to give themselves to five practices with the goal of helping them to become perceptive to God at work. So for example every day, first thing in the morning, everyone in their church prays for just a couple minutes wherever they are. And they pray "God I want to see You at work today, give me eyes of faith."

And on Sundays when they get together they share with each other what kinds of things they saw God do in their lives throughout the week. Now when they first began this practice Cam mentioned that it was really awkward and people had a hard time seeing how God had been involved in their lives at all. But as the months and years have gone by they have gotten better and better at seeing where God is on the move and now it is one of the most loved parts of their service.

Now this doesn't mean they get it right all the time. But getting it all right isn't the point. Jesus wasn't thrown off by the fact that His disciples didn't get it 100% right all the time – in fact in the three years Jesus spent walking with them in person they didn't get it 100% right once – and we won't either. Friends when it comes to discerning God's heart for what He wants us to do and how He wants us to live we must not fall into the trap of thinking we have to understand everything before we step out in obedient faith.

Let me say this in another way: when it comes to seeing God at work our job is not to figure out what God has in mind for us as individuals or a church before we step out and get involved. Instead when we see God on the move our job is to jump in with both feet and serve and worship with reckless abandon, because that is what donkeys and disciples do when they meet Jesus.

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There is a warning here as well. You see donkeys and disciples weren't the only ones to see Jesus entering Jerusalem that day. There were others who saw the exact same things, but through totally different eyes.

Look again at verse 39 and following.

[Read Luke 19:39-44]

Jesus' response to the Pharisees is blatant. Jesus says donkeys are seeing Me with eyes of faith and responding appropriately, crowds of disciples are seeing Me with eyes of faith and responding appropriately. And if you stop them then I'll give the dirt eyes of faith and it will respond appropriately.

The point here is that if we turn down the eyes of faith God offers and so don't join in what He is doing, and stop others from joining in what He is doing, it won't affect His Kingdom at all. Jesus will get the worship He deserves because He is sovereign. But if we oppose Him we will not only miss out, but will actually become His enemies.

And the Pharisees will not see God in what Jesus is doing. Now they are way more aware than the donkey, they have way more knowledge than the crowd, and certainly unlike dirt they actually had eyes, but yet they don't see. They won't see, and so the Pharisees are missing everything.

Donkeys, disciples and even dirt can receive eyes of faith to see God on the move while often good religious people don't.

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And in verses 41-44 Jesus prophesies destruction because of this. While weeping over Jerusalem, what was supposed to be the holy city, but had somehow become an enemy city, Jesus prophesied: "This day was bringing you peace but it was hidden from your eyes. You didn't recognize God at work, and now your destruction is assured. Your enemies will come and encircle you and tear you down so much that one stone will not be left on another.

And this happened in 70AD, about 40 years after Jesus prophesied this. The Romans came in and obliterated Jerusalem because this holy city, full of good religious people would not recognize God's visitation.

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So what are we, a bunch of people sitting in a religious building 2000 years later, supposed to take from this?

There are three things:

First, eyes of faith able to see what God is doing are a gift not a natural ability. That means it doesn't matter how smart you are or how much life experience you have, people with Masters of Divinity degrees and donkeys have the same ability to have them. Eyes of faith are a gift from God.

Now unlike donkeys and dirt, God will not force Himself on us. While He offers each of us the gift of faith He leaves the choice to receive and keep on receiving it up to us. And if we will not receive it, the fact that in many aspects we are superior to dirt and donkeys will do us no good. So don't miss this. Friends, ask Jesus for the ability to see how He is at work.

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Second, a complete understanding of what God is doing is totally irrelevant to a correct response of faith.

God doesn't expect us to understand what He is doing, He just expects us to worship. The donkey in this story really had no idea why he didn't need to be broken. And certainly if it had gotten to the point of the stones crying out no one would have attributed the ability to worship correctly to them. And even the disciples in this account had little understanding of what God was really up to. But none of that mattered. All that matters is when we see God at work we shout out in worship "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord."

So brothers and sisters don't miss this, make sure you are a worshipping, because if you won't God will find something else that will.

And finally, we must guard ourselves against hard-heartedness. When we fail to see God on the move and so refuse to jump into exuberant worship the consequences aren't minor. Jesus says good religious people can actually find themselves becoming God's enemies. Please don't let that be you.

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So brothers and sisters its Palm Sunday. 2000 years ago Jesus entered Jerusalem on His Father's mission, and He is on the move in Prince George today whether we see Him or not. So would you please stand with me and pray for the one gift that can separate donkeys, disciples and even dirt from good religious people?