

# Lessons from a Donkey

BY ALAN R. RUDNICK

**What needs to be untied in our lives, so that we can praise and honor God? When it is untied and let go, nothing can stop the love of God and neighbor that is inside of us. Palm Sunday is the day when we, like Jesus' animal companion, are set loose to be used for the work of God.**

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**W**hen I was a boy, my church distributed huge palm branches to the children who processed down the center aisle at the beginning of the service. I remember it being a celebration filled with excitement and joy. As a seven-year-old, I was excited that we could walk down the aisle during worship waving a tree branch around and shout aloud without being reprimanded by parents. It was the only time in church that we were allowed to shout, yell, and jump. Through the years my pastor preached different themes on Palm Sunday, focusing on the children, the disciples, the palm branches, the road to Jerusalem, or the crowd's excitement. However, there was never a focus on the donkey that Jesus rides or what the donkey could teach us.



One Palm Sunday scripture, Luke 19:28-40, is not like the others, and in its peculiarity it is truly worth a second, third, or even a fourth look. Luke paints the picture of Jesus before his death with specific details. Christ is walking up to the city mount; it is quite a climb up to Jerusalem, which sits about 3800 feet above sea level. Earlier the evangelist has written that Jesus "set his face towards Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51), a prophetic phrase which means that Jesus' mission was with the Holy City. Now Jesus has reached the edge of Jerusalem and must face his last meal with his friends, betrayal, trial, punishment, and finally death. So, how is he welcomed into the city? With joy, celebration, and anticipation. How ironic it is that some people who welcome Jesus as King would be among those who shout Jesus to his death.

Jesus instructs two unnamed disciples to go into the village ahead and look for a colt (John 12:14 states that this animal is a donkey). Who were these two disciples – John and James, or Peter and Matthew – and why are they unnamed? Usually when disciples do something significant in the Gospels, they are mentioned by name. Apparently Luke deems their assignment – to find an animal for Jesus to ride – to be of little importance. I have often wondered if these two disciples sensed the lowliness of their mission. I imagine them saying to one another:

“Jesus is always sending us on ‘go-for’ missions – go for this or go for that. Remember when he sent us to get some fish and bread one time? Oh, then there was the time he wanted us to produce a coin with Caesar’s face on it.”

“Yeah I remember that. And there was that time at a wedding when we had to get those heavy jugs of water, and then Jesus turned the water into wine.”

“Why is Jesus always doing the exciting work while we do the dirty work?”

“How come we can’t be like Peter, and get to do the cool stuff like walk on water!”

Jesus wanted to let his disciples know that he was not sending them on a “go-for” mission – the equivalent of a modern day Starbucks run. Little did these two disciples know that their task was critical to the Palm Sunday event. They are to retrieve a donkey, which is perhaps the most overlooked character in the story. Unlike Baalam’s donkey in the Old Testament, this one does not speak nor impart some divine wisdom.



This donkey was born for Jesus’ wonderful work. It had not been used or ridden by anyone else. This donkey was tied up so that it could not wander away or be taken by someone else. It was waiting for Jesus to climb on to ride.

The colt (*polos*) has royal associations. Jesus’ riding the donkey echoes this regal arrival in Zechariah’s prophecy:

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.

*Zechariah 9:9*

Nevertheless, to modern readers the donkey seems to be an unlikely and surprising device for Jesus' use. That is because we see donkeys primarily as work animals capable of carrying heavy loads, or as docile creatures used for children's rides, but certainly not as the animals of choice to transport triumphant kings.<sup>†</sup> In the ancient world, however, donkeys were used for ceremonial purposes. Whereas horses were symbols of war, donkeys were symbols of peace and often used to enact treaties.



There is more significance to the donkey in this story. Earlier I noted the donkey was tied up and had to be untied by the disciples. In five verses in Luke 19 the word "tied" or some form of it is mentioned. The detail is important. This donkey was created for a purpose and was meant for Jesus. It was tied; it needed to be untied. Why does Luke emphasize this several times? There is an insight here.

We are often tied aren't we? We are tied down by many things—by guilt, anxiety, and concern. Some of us are tied down with the need to forgive, but we cannot bring ourselves to do it. Others are tied down to obsessions or chemical dependence. We may be tied down to our smartphones and tablets, and be unable to put those devices down. Some need to let go and not be afraid to show love, peace, faith, joy, or the gospel to others. As Christians, we need to be untied from what weighs us down. Palm Sunday is not just a celebration of Christ as King, but a celebration of Jesus as our liberator from dependencies and afflictions. We need to be free to experience Jesus in our lives. We are meant to ride with Jesus: to follow him on his journey to Jerusalem, the Holy City, the city where God dwells. We were created with a purpose: to love God and love each other. As a pastor, I witness every day the real life troubles that bind people to dysfunction and they are too scared to untie themselves from the chains of fear.

We cannot fully commit to God when we are tied. We must be released. We must surrender our burdens and our weights to God, much like the owner who surrendered his donkey to the two disciples. By relinquishing our own burdens, we can praise and worship God freely. We can praise him just like those who praised Jesus with palms and coats, saying:

Blessed is the king  
 who comes in the name of Lord!  
 Peace in heaven  
 and glory [to God] in the highest heaven.

*Luke 19:38*

When we are untied, we can live a life of faith free from the pressure of trying to hold things up. When we are free, we can praise God without any hindrance. It is a spirit of relinquishment, of letting go of that which

weighs us down so mightily, that which we fight against because we are so used to fighting it.

Palm Sunday is an occasion when we can ask ourselves, “What is it that needs to be untied in my life, so that I can praise and honor God?” When it is untied and let go, nothing can stop the love of God and neighbor that is inside of us. It is in our nature to praise God, as it is in all things; even the very rocks of the earth could proclaim the glory and power of God (Luke 19:40).

Palm Sunday is the day when we, like Jesus’ animal companion, are untied and set loose to be used for the work of God. Palm Sunday frees us to experience Holy Week in way that does not hold us from truly singing loud “Hosannas” and “Alleluias” on Easter morning. Let us be untied to share in the Palm Sunday event so that we may unite with the One who was tied on a cross to be our savior.

#### **NOTE**

† The donkey is just one of the unlikely instruments of divine praise in this story, though (as I have said) it is the most neglected one. John 12:13 mentions the palm branches waved by the crowd, which gives Palm Sunday its name in the Church calendar. Luke describes the people laying their coats down on the road for Jesus (Luke 19:36), and Mark and Matthew has them spreading their coats and leafy branches on the pathway (Mark 11:8; Matthew 21:8). When some Pharisees complain about the people’s exuberance, Jesus explains “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out” (Luke 19:40). John Wesley got it exactly right in his commentary on this verse: “That is, God would raise up some still more unlikely instruments to declare his praise.” (*John Wesley’s Notes on the Bible*, Luke 19:40)



**ALAN R. RUDNICK**

*is Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Ballston Spa, New York.*