

THIS DONKEY HAS A LOT TO SAY ABOUT JESUS

John 12:12-16 | Palm Sunday | March 29, 2015

Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, "Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt."

Jesus

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

I want to tell you the story of a talking donkey. I'm not making this up. It comes right from the Bible. Balaak, the king of Moab, was worried. He was worried that this wandering multitude called Israel was going to attack and destroy his nation. So he reached out to a sorcerer named Balaam, offering to pay him handsomely if he would put a curse on Israel. Balaam loaded up his donkey and went to see the king.

The Lord was upset about all this. He didn't want the people he had blessed to be cursed. So he sent an angel to get in Balaam's way. Only Balaam's donkey could see it. Whenever the donkey would see the angel he would stop and refuse to go further. Balaam would then beat the donkey. At one point the donkey simply lay down on the ground. Balaam was furious and beat the donkey with his staff.

At this point a strange thing happened. **The LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"** The conversation continued, but you get the idea: a talking donkey.

In the portion of God's Word before us this Palm Sunday we see another talking

donkey. No, this one doesn't open his mouth and speak actual words.

Nevertheless, THIS DONKEY HAS A LOT TO SAY ABOUT JESUS. He tells us that Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy. He tells us that Jesus is a King like no other. He tells us that Jesus came to save.

I. Jesus is the Fulfillment of Prophecy

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on that Sunday was no accident. In fact, nothing in Jesus' time on earth was an accident. It was all planned and prophesied by God, right down to the smallest detail. Jesus came in fulfillment of Scripture.

Let me give you some examples. It was prophesied that the Messiah would be born in a little town called Bethlehem. When the time had fully come, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Isaiah prophesied that the promised Savior would preach good news and heal the sick. One day, after reading those prophetic verses, Jesus said: **"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."** Just think of all the little details we've been hearing about in our Lord's passion history. Jesus pierced by thorns, nail and spear and yet not one broken bone. Jesus saying, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me," and "I am thirsty." The soldiers casting lots for Jesus' clothing, and many others that we could mention. All of these things

happened in direct fulfillment of Scripture.

We have another fulfillment before us today – a big one. In the Old Testament lesson we heard Zechariah’s prophecy: **See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey** (9:9). In our text we see that prophecy, made five centuries earlier, come to life as Jesus rides that donkey down the Mount of Olives into the ancient city where he would die.

There are two reasons this is important and comforting. First, we can trust what God says. In prayer Jesus once said to his Father: **“Your Word is truth”** (John 17:17). God said that the Messiah, our promised Savior and King, would arrive on a donkey to carry out his saving work, and that’s exactly what happened. As Paul tells us: **No matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ** (2 Corinthians 1:20).

Secondly, we can trust that Jesus Christ is our Savior. Every sign points to him. Over 350 biblical prophecies are fulfilled in him and in no one else. There’s nobody else who was born in Bethlehem, preached the good news, performed miracles and rode donkey into Jerusalem to die. These things are his calling cards. We don’t need to look for another Savior. Without actually uttering a word, that donkey speaks loudly and clearly: Jesus is the One.

II. Jesus is a King like No Other

Jesus didn’t ride that donkey into an empty city. There was large crowd gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, perhaps hundreds of thousands of people. Many of them came out to welcome Jesus. The crowd hailed him as a king.

They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Blessed is the King of Israel!” Palm branches are symbols of victory. They were excited to welcome the king who would win the victory for them.

But what kind of victory were they hoping for? Sadly, many if not most of them were looking for a military victory. They wanted a warrior-king who would lick the Romans and kick them out of the Promised Land. They wanted a bread-king who would keep their bellies full. They wanted him to bring prosperity: two chariots in every garage and a fattened calf in every pot. Most had no idea why he had really come: to give his life in sacrifice for sinners, to provide forgiveness and eternal life. Even his disciples were somewhat confused. We’re told that **at first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.**

How about us? Do we get confused sometimes too? Do we ever look to Jesus to deliver what he never promised? For example, I’ve heard countless times: “I

believe that God wants me to be happy.” Translation: God promises me a good, easy and fulfilling life on this earth. Really? Where does God promise that? Jesus said the opposite. He said, **“In this world you will have trouble”** (John 16:33). He said: **“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”** (Mark 8:34). He said: **“All men will hate you because of me”** (Matthew 10:22). He promised that being his follower would require self-denial and bring hardship. Yet sometimes we might get a little perturbed with Jesus if the needle on our happiness gauge isn’t always pegged out at full. Sometimes we buy into the so called *prosperity gospel*. “I’m a disciple of Jesus Christ. I should go from one happy day to the next, my bank account should be full, and my every effort should be crowned with success.”

Now, I doubt that any of us would ever say such extreme things but if we examine our hearts honestly we’ll have to admit to falling into that kind of thinking from time to time. And probably more often than that. We are such broken creatures by nature. We are so distracted by the pursuit of happiness, so focused on what makes us feel good, that far too often we look to Jesus as nothing more than a prosperity machine, a bread-king.

I think it’s time to listen to the donkey again. Look at the “steed” Jesus rode into town. It was a donkey, a lowly beast of burden. Now some will argue that Israel’s kings traditionally rode donkeys. David did, for example (1 Kings 1:38). And that’s true. But this was the Roman era. Horses

were used as royal mounts now. No self-respecting monarch would mount up on a donkey. But Jesus came as a different kind of king. He came in humility. He didn’t dress to impress. No royal robes, no golden crown. He had no military guard, no soldiers with sharp swords, shining shield and fluttering banners. His guard was made up of a bunch of raggedy disciples. He didn’t come to conquer or control or guarantee earthly prosperity. He came to establish peace between a holy God and sinful human beings. And he stopped at nothing to make that happen.

III. Jesus is Our Humble Savior

Look where that donkey was carrying Jesus. Right into a trap. Right into the hornets’ nest. Right into the enemies’ lair. And what’s more, Jesus knew it. He predicted it. Jesus told his disciples on more than one occasion that he had to go to Jerusalem **to suffer many things, to be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again** (Mark 8:31). Luke tells us that **Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem** (Luke 9:51). Nothing could stand in his way. Nothing could stop him from going to the cross for us.

Why? It wasn’t a death wish. It was a life wish. He wanted life for us. His greatest desire is to spend eternity with us. The only way to get that done was to get rid of the sin that separated us from him. And the only way to do that was to bear the punishment for sin. And so **he humbled himself and became obedient to death –**

even death on a cross (Philippians 2:8). He took our shame upon himself. He endured the death and hell that we deserve. He did it so that we can have life with him forever.

All my self-centered thinking, all my selfish longing for prosperity, my obsessive pursuit of happiness at all costs, my greed, my lust, my whining and complaining, my laziness – all of it is gone, washed away in the beautiful red tide of Jesus' holy blood. The sign, seal and guarantee of his mission accomplished is the emptiness of his tomb. My friends, be certain of this. Your sins are all forgiven. Your *eternal* happiness is a done deal.

So what about earthly happiness? Jesus changes our view of what brings true fulfillment and joy. We find real fulfillment, not in serving ourselves, but in serving others, just like Jesus who came not to be served, but to serve. We find real happiness in our vocations, in being faithful husband and wives, nurturing father and mothers, diligent students and loyal friends, fair employers and hard-working employees. We find true joy in doing all things – eating, drinking, whatever – to the glory of God. We find our happiness not in the fleeting, rusting, moth-eaten treasures stored in a wallet, garage or closet, but in the gospel treasures stored up for us in Word and Sacrament and in the eternal treasures that await us in heaven. Finally, true happiness, now and eternally, is found only in Jesus.

It was a miracle. Balaam's donkey actually

talked. But what this donkey says is a lot more important. What precious cargo sat on that donkey's back! That lowly creature carried the Creator himself to a shameful death. And because of that we get to enjoy life now and forever. Thanks be to Jesus, the fulfillment of Scripture, the King of the universe, and our Savior of all people – even us! Amen.

S.D.G.