

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
March 24, 2024

## **Useful to God**

Mark 11:1-11

As soon as you arrive at our church's main entrance, you can tell that we're an animal friendly congregation. Two black cats have found a home here. In fact, they've got their own miniature sanctuary/shelter. Judging from an additional cat or two that we've seen here from time to time, it looks like the cats may be evangelizing in the neighborhood.

This wouldn't be the first time that an animal was involved in helping proclaim the good news that Jesus is Lord. In today's text from Mark, a donkey plays a key part in the public acclamation of Jesus' kingship. In fact, it's notable how much attention Mark gives to this animal. He describes where the disciples will find it, what they're supposed to do with it, and how they're supposed to respond to those who question why they're taking it. Then Mark tells us the disciples put their cloaks on the donkey, Jesus sat on it, and this lowly creature became the Messiah's mode of transportation into Jerusalem. Not a bad assignment for an unglamorous animal who was just going about its uneventful existence. One minute you're tied to a post outside someone's house, and the next minute you're giving the Savior a ride to the capital city.

The President of the United States rides in a Cadillac limo-SUV hybrid nicknamed "The Beast." It's heavily armored, has a secure communications system, and is hermetically sealed against chemical attacks. It also includes run-flat tires, night-vision devices, smoke screens, and oil slicks as measures against attackers. In case of a medical emergency, the car has stores of blood in the President's type. And that's just the President's ground transportation. Remember that when he's in the air, he has other options, Air Force One and Marine One.

For his trip into the seat of power, Jesus has his own beast. Granted, it pales in comparison to a presidential motorcade, but it does have at least one special feature. No one has ever ridden on it. This could be Mark's way of highlighting the donkey's sacred purpose, or it could be an allusion to Zechariah 9:9, which speaks of how the messianic king would enter Jerusalem, "gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Either way, this four-legged limo draws its significance not so much from itself but from its passenger and his destination.

Though there's a poem by G. K. Chesterton titled "The Donkey," in which a donkey narrates his experience of being an oddity among the animals of the world with his "monstrous head and sickening cry" and "ears like errant wings." He feels like something went wrong when he was created, and sees himself as "the tattered outlaw of the earth." But near the end of the poem, the donkey informs us that he has a secret. Jesus Christ rode him into Jerusalem: "Fools! For I also had my hour; / One far fierce hour and sweet: / There was a shout about my ears, / And palms before my feet." Interestingly, the donkey describes this experience as if it was him the crowd was celebrating. Here is the donkey's one shining moment, but it could be that the spotlight was on Jesus and not on himself.

There's no doubt that for those who accompany Jesus on his donkey ride into Jerusalem, our Lord is the focus of their attention and the object of their acclamation. "Hosanna!" they shout as their mobile worship service approaches the holy city. This is a plea for salvation, a prayer that their enemies, those who oppressively rule over them, will be driven out. That primarily means the Romans. As Philip Yancey writes, "I can imagine a Roman officer galloping up to check on the disturbance. He has attended processions in Rome, where they do it right. The conquering general sits in a chariot of gold, with stallions straining at the reins and wheel spikes flashing in the sunlight."<sup>1</sup>

Outwardly, Jesus and his band of Passover pilgrims don't appear to pose much of a threat. They pave the way for their king with cloaks and branches. They wield a weapon called prayer. They're armed with music, songs they've learned from their Scriptures: "Blessed is he who comes in the names of the Lord!" (v. 9). What a lowly and unspectacular show of force. If this is their idea of an enthronement procession, then their king must not be as great as they think. What kind of ruler arrives to take power with a baby donkey as his chariot?

Clearly this is a Messiah who doesn't play by the world's rules of power and might. His definitions of greatness contradict the ways that the present age measures prominence and prestige. True, he brings in a kingdom, a new dominion called the reign of God. That's what he has been preaching and practicing. And even now, during the procession to Jerusalem, the ragtag crowd in front of him and behind him declares that there's a new world coming. But this kingdom seems so upside down. Those who serve are the greatest. Those who are humble are exalted. Those who are lowly are lifted up. Even this king's royal transport, this donkey, plods along as a visible protest to the way the world works.

Some of you may recall pictures of Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin that were published back in 2009. He was riding a horse shirtless, wearing a gold chain, wrap-around sunglasses, and army trousers. Another image from 2010 showed a bare-chested Putin carrying a hunting rifle, while in another he was wearing a wetsuit, carrying some artefacts he recovered while diving at an archaeological site. In other pictures he was sunbathing topless and swimming with dolphins. The pictures became widely interpreted as an attempt to project a macho image to the world. A couple of years ago, at a summit of wealthy nations, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson jokingly asked his colleagues if they should take off their jackets, or even disrobe further. "We all have to show that we're tougher than Putin," said Johnson. He noted that maybe they should "show them our pecs."

According to the values of the world, leaders, and the nations they represent, need to project an image of strength and toughness. Might is what matters. That's the way things work in the kingdoms of this present age. But on his procession into the seat of power, Jesus isn't interested in showing off his pecs. In fact, there's a certain ambivalence about the whole event. Jesus is depicted by Mark as silent. He isn't waving excitedly to the crowd or doing fist pumps to onlookers. Yes, he is the world's true ruler, but not in the way that they think.

Esau McCaulley says "Jesus' claim to be the Messiah was not simply about a goal—God's rule over all things. He and the crowd agreed on that point. His earthly life and ministry were about the *means* of accomplishing that goal: namely, sacrificial love."<sup>2</sup> Jesus communicated this countercultural kingdom through his preaching and teaching. He practiced it in his way of living and ministering. He gathered around him a community of followers to embody this upside-down reign of God. And on the occasion we now celebrate as Palm Sunday, Jesus chose a symbol that would point to the nature of his kingship, a

young donkey. This unarmored "beast" is a sign of humility and lowliness, not political or military strength.

As I noted earlier, Mark devotes significant attention to this donkey. Over half of his story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem has to do with the details of acquiring this animal. But by the end of our text, having delivered Jesus to his destination, the donkey exits the story. We assume he is returned to his owner. Back to the daily tasks of farming, transportation, or carrying other loads, and in between, being tied to somebody's post.

But the memory of this donkey has certainly been preserved and celebrated within the life of the church. This time each year, some congregations even use a live donkey as part of their Palm Sunday worship gatherings. If we were to try that, I'm not sure how the cats on our front porch would react, unless we figure out some way to include them in the procession. It reminds me of the time that our brother in Christ, Raymond Smith, arrived here for Sunday morning worship carrying a lamb in his arms, as a live demonstration for Amber Krivitsky's children's sermon on the role of sheep in the Bible. Were he still with us, Raymond would probably have the connections to help us borrow a donkey.

Though useful to many, the donkey in our text was never more useful than when Jesus borrowed it for his ride into Jerusalem. In his instructions for acquiring the animal, Jesus tells the two disciples, "If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly'" (v. 3).

"The Lord needs it." With those words, the donkey's obscure, ordinary, lowly life is gathered up into the great unfolding story of God's work of redeeming the world. Here at the beginning of Jesus' final week, his journey into suffering and death, the Lord lays claim to a donkey for a sacred purpose. How much more so for us, as Jesus gathers us into what he is doing for the world. The Lord needs that donkey. The Lord needs you. The Lord needs you in the continued outworking of what he accomplished through the cross, namely the reconciliation of the world to God.

Jesus' way of arriving in Jerusalem shows us that God's kingdom is about forgiveness not force. And when you receive and experience the forgiveness of sins, confessing Jesus as Lord of your life, you offer yourself to him in self-sacrificing love, trusting that he can use you for his kingdom and its purposes.

In *Psalms of My Life*, Joseph Bayly writes about Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. Note that where he uses the word "ass" I've inserted the word "donkey." Bayly says:

King Jesus, why did you choose a lowly donkey to carry you to ride in your parade? Had you no friend who owned a horse—a royal mount with spirit fit for a king to ride? Why choose a donkey, small, unassuming beast of burden trained to plow not carry kings.

King Jesus, why did you choose me, a lowly unimportant person to bear you in my world today? I'm poor and unimportant, trained to work not carry kings—let alone the King of kings, and yet you've chosen me to carry you in triumph in this world's parade. King Jesus, keep me small so all may see how great you are; keep me humble so all may say, "Blessed is he who cometh in the name of the Lord," not what a great donkey he rides.<sup>3</sup>

The great procession that ends in the presence of the Lord is already underway. In the book of Revelation we hear: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (11:15). So as we continue our journey toward what God has promised in Christ, and serve his kingdom here in the

present, remember that the Lord needs you. His sovereign love and eternal purpose mean that you, your life, is useful to him.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 190.

<sup>2</sup> Esau McCaulley, "This Palm Sunday, Ponder Donkeys, Not Branches." *Christianity Today*. March 30, 2023. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/march-web-only/palm-sunday-easter-holy-week-donkeys-not-branches.html> (March 21, 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Christianity Today*. March 17, 1989. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1989/march-17/reflections-classic-and-contemporary-excerpts.html> (March 21, 2024).