Predicting that the two disciples would encounter resistance, Jesus said to them, “If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately’” (v. 3). Jesus had his followers spread the word that the Lord needed a donkey, to get people talking and so there would be a crowd on the road to Jerusalem. Jesus was building a buzz among the people, creating controversy, injecting some suspense. Sure enough, the disciples went into the village and found a colt in the street, just as Jesus predicted. And as they were untying it, people confronted them, just as Jesus said they would. When they told them what Jesus had said, the people allowed the disciples to take it. The donkey was cooperative, not stubborn (vv. 4-6).

The disciples brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it. Jesus sat on it and began to ride it toward Jerusalem (v. 7). The prophet Zechariah predicted that the coming ruler of God’s people would arrive in Jerusalem on a donkey: “Lo, your king comes to you,” said the prophet, “triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9). In ancient times, leaders rode donkeys in civil processions and rode horses in military ones. A king arriving on a donkey indicated his peaceful intentions. Jesus remembered how Solomon rode a donkey at his anointing as the new king of Israel (1 Kings 1:33). The donkey was noble, not lowly.

Mark tells us that many people “spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields” (Mark 11:8). Then the people “who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’” (vv. 9-10). Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah by entering Jerusalem as the ruler of God’s people, humble and riding on a donkey. And after riding the animal to the temple, he went out to Bethany with his disciples. Along the way, he probably took the time to return the colt to its owner.

Jesus made a conscious decision to ride a donkey, not a horse. “Horses are speedy,” writes Christopher McDougall, “but when it comes to steadiness, stamina, and heroic resistance to heat, cold and thirst, you can’t do better than a burro.” McDougall is not surprised that people of all stripes from King Solomon, to the prophets, to Mary, to Jesus, to President Ulysses S. Grant, to Queen Victoria, to Frank Sinatra made donkeys a preferred form of transport. Even George Washington, once described by Thomas Jefferson as “the greatest horseman of his age,” was a donkey guy. King Charles III of Spain gave Washington a pair of burros which he turned them into America’s only breeding herd. (*Burro* is the Spanish word for donkey!)

The donkey of Palm Sunday teaches us a few things about being persons who carry Jesus into the world. We carry Jesus forward in the decisions we make and in the actions we take. Like donkeys, we make our decisions with God-given intelligence.

Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health and a widely respected physician and geneticist, led the Human Genome Project and had a prominent role in containing the coronavirus pandemic. Collins is also a deeply committed Christian who works hard to find harmony between science and biblical faith. A journalist asked Collins about what he hoped Christians would understand about science. Collins answered, “Think of science as a gift from the Creator. The curiosity that we have been instilled with to understand how the universe works can inspire even greater awe of the Creator. This gift could hardly be a threat to God, the author of it all. Celebrate what science can teach us. Think of science as a form of worship.” Collins believes that we should all make our decisions with God-given curiosity and intelligence.

The donkey also teaches us to take actions that are cooperative, not adversarial. This means working alongside our neighbors to serve a world in need, without constantly competing for resources, power, or influence. Now it is certainly true that we should be committed to the foundations of our faith, holding fast to our belief that Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.” We will be remembering this line from the Apostles’ Creed as we make our way through Holy Week.

But being committed is not the same as being stubborn. We can work alongside people of different faiths, as well as people of no faith, to feed the hungry. A Christian named Greg Damhorst tells the story of a campus event in which he packaged meals for Haiti. The event planners were an evangelical Christian, a Catholic, a Buddhist, a Hindu, and a Humanist. “In a single weekend,” he reports, “5,112 volunteers from every walk of life, faith and philosophical tradition passed through that site to lend a hand. In less than 12 hours, 1,012,640 meals were packaged for shipment to Haiti where they were protected by the 82nd Airborne and distributed by Salvation Army humanitarian workers.” The event was a story “of coming together,” he writes, “a story of cooperation…a story of interfaith work.”

Finally, we serve Jesus as people with God-given nobility. Like the donkey who carried Jesus, we can walk through the world with confidence and grace. “You are a chosen race,” wrote the apostle Peter, “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.” As God’s royal people, we should hold our heads high and never feel that we are second-class citizens in this world. But this standing is not intended to make us feel superior to others. Instead, it is a status designed for service, “in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). Intelligent, cooperative, noble. That is the character of the heroic donkey, and the qualities of Christians who want to carry Jesus forward in what they think, do, and say.

Prayer: O Christ, you entered the city as a poor man not in style but simply, yet still you caused uproar, and questions everywhere; you drew the expectations of a hungry crowd, and brought buried conflicts to the light. May we, who are sometimes swayed by the crowd's approval, and who often avoid conflict for fear of its cost to us, hold fast to the gospel of peace and justice and follow faithfully in your way of compassion and solidarity with those who are poor and excluded, wherever it may lead us. **Amen.**

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**Donkey Sunday**

Palm Sunday, March 28, 2021 Mark 11:1-11

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

In the Bible, what has six legs, four eyes, two heads, and a tail? Jesus riding on a donkey! Today is Palm Sunday, so named for the “leafy branches” that people cut in the fields and placed on the road in front of Jesus (Mark 11:8). It is the day we think of crowds shouting “Hosanna” and Jesus entering Jerusalem in triumph, hailed as the “the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” (v. 9). Palm Sunday is a day of celebration, with people cheering the One they hoped would usher in “the kingdom of our ancestor David!” (v. 10).

What we usually do not think about is the donkey on which Jesus rode into town. Which is a shame, because today could easily be called “Donkey Sunday.” Unfortunately, donkeys have “a bad reputation,” says archaeologist Fiona Marshall. “They’re considered stupid, and stubborn and lowly.” But this is unfair and inaccurate. Donkeys are “extremely intelligent,” she says. “Whole trade routes were built on donkeys, and the wealth of ancient Egypt depended on them.”

Many years ago, traders went all the way from the Middle East to China, along with their donkeys. In the Tang Dynasty, high-class women played a game like polo, in which players rode donkeys instead of horses. When one particular noblewoman died, she had donkeys sacrificed and buried with her, so that she could continue to ride them in the afterlife. Stupid, stubborn, and lowly was not the reputation of donkeys in ancient China.

Jesus knew what he was doing when he made his preparations to enter Jerusalem. He sent two of his disciples ahead of him, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it” (Mark 11:1-2). Jesus was taking his chances with an unbroken colt, but he knew that the animal was intelligent, not stupid.