

SERIES - HOW GOD USES ORDINARY PEOPLE TO DO EXTRAORDINARY THINGS: THE OVERLOADED PEOPLE OF LENT
“The Couple Who Donated the Donkey”

Luke 19:28-40

It was only 17 miles but seemed longer, even on a bus. A group of us wound our way up the highway from Jericho, the lowest point on earth, to Jerusalem, well above sea level. Travelers start climbing in the Judean desert. At about the halfway point you hit sea level and you still have a mountain to ascend. It is almost always hot, and, since it seldom rains, it is usually dusty as well. As you approach Jerusalem, the excitement builds. You pass Bethany and Bethpage. Suddenly Jerusalem appears. When you are there in mid-March at the conclusion of the rainy season and time of the Passover festival, Jerusalem is green and beautiful.

Jesus and the disciples made the trip on foot with thousands of other pilgrims on their way to the Passover festival. When they arrived, they crowded Jerusalem for the slaughter of Passover lambs and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. They remembered their heritage of exodus from Egyptian captivity centuries before, after the Angel of Death passed over Hebrew homes, taking only the Egyptian firstborn.

Jesus went ahead of the twelve. He had plans, and arrangements to make. On Sunday, Palm/Passion Sunday, he would make a triumphal entry into the city riding on a donkey. On Thursday, Maundy Thursday, he would eat the Passover meal with the Twelve at the Last Supper in the Upper Room. On Friday he'd be crucified. The week ahead, which we call “Holy,” would be the climax of his ministry. **Like the great prophets before him, he would preach with actions as well as words.** Jesus knew what waited for him. On several occasions he told his disciples he'd go to Jerusalem, and be arrested and crucified. It was his calling to be the **Suffering Servant**, whom the prophet Isaiah foretold. Jesus decided to accept the call and follow the details of what scripture predicted. To start he would enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey. The prophet Zachariah had described how the messiah would enter Jerusalem:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold your king is coming to you;
Righteous and having salvation is he,
Humble and mounted on a donkey,
On a colt, the foal of a donkey (9.7)*

When Jesus staged his entry, everyone, friend and foe, would get the **message: Jesus is God's anointed, the messiah.** His first order of business was to secure the donkey.

We have been hearing about this Palm Sunday event for years. We understand that a king riding on a donkey would communicate his peaceful intentions. Jesus was showing how his messiah-ship differed from popular expectations.

But, have you ever wondered about the couple who provided the donkey?

(1) They just fade into background, seemingly inconsequential. The gospels allow them to be unnamed and unknown. They may be common, everyday folk, but God used them for an extraordinary purpose. When we think about them, we learn important things about God and ourselves.

First, we learn that God uses the people and things of this world to accomplish our salvation and the redemption of the world. God does not need anything material or spiritual from us. God is complete and self-sufficient in all divine attributes. God lacks nothing. Sometimes you hear that God created us because he needed someone or something to love. No. The Father has the Son and Spirit to love; the Son has the Father and the Spirit to love; and the Spirit has the Father and the Son to love. God is complete and fulfilled in the Trinitarian godhead. It is true that God made the world from love and saves the world because of his love. And, while God loves our love in return, God does not need anything from us.

That said, when Luke reports that when Jesus' disciples went to collect the donkey from its owners, they said, ***"The Lord has need of it."*** Jesus cannot complete his mission without it or one like it. He needs a donkey. He needs the couple's generosity and animal.

My friend, Bob Simmons, wrote this:

The God who is complete within himself and has no need of anyone or anything is found again and again in scripture relying on the cooperation of his creation. The creator, who needs nothing, has chosen to allow his creatures to participate alongside their creator in accomplishing God's purpose and will. God has chosen us to be his partners in mission. (2)

Someone said, "Without God we cannot, but without us God will not." God has chosen to use us and the things of this world to accomplish his purposes. God uses ordinary people for extraordinary ends.

Second, we learn God is not shy about asking for our most valued possessions. Lew Evans was the pastor of a large church in Erie, PA. He had a wealthy parishioner who was advanced in years. Lew asked him if he would consider remembering the church in his will. He said, "I was going to, but then I decided to leave my estate to my college."

"All of it?" Lew asked. "Why all of it?"

"Because they asked me to do it."

"They asked you to give all of your estate to the college?" Lew gasped.

“Yes,” he said.

The college fundraiser was not shy about asking for valued possessions.
Neither is God.

Think of what a donkey meant on those days. They were burden-bearing animals. They were trucks who carried loads, tractors that pulled plows, cars that transported people. Many people were so poor that a single family could not afford a donkey. (3) A group or neighborhood might chip in, buy one, and share it. Jesus was bold to ask to use the one owned by the couple of whom Luke tells. That’s the way God is – completely assertive about asking for our most valuable possessions.

But then, God is also completely assertive about giving us his most valued possession, his Son. You know the verse: “*God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...*” This is what Lent is about – Jesus going to Jerusalem to be the sacrificial Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The Father freely gives the Son to the world as the Son freely gives his life for the world. God asks no less of us than he does for us.

Third, we learn God will not take; we must give. God gives us faith, grace, hope, life; but it is up to us as to what and how much of ourselves we will give to God. When I completed my doctorate at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, I was required to go there periodically for two-week intensive courses. On one occasion Joanie came with me, while my sister and brother-in-law watched our boys. About thirty minutes after we arrived at our seminary apartment, there was a knock at the door. It was my friend, Denn Denning, a pastor in nearby San Marino. Denn handed me a set of car keys and said, “Susan and I want you to have our second car for these two weeks.”
“Oh Denn, thank you, but we can’t take your car for two weeks.”
He replied, “No, Dave, we want you to use it. If I have a car, you have a car.”
That’s God way.

We have no report of what Jesus’ conversation with the donkey’s owner was like. Nor do we know how they decided to share their coveted possession. I have referred to the owners as a couple; the text simply says “*owners.*” It seems plausible and likely that they were husband and wife. Were they both followers of Jesus who were happy to assist him? Was one a disciple and the other not, so one agreed reluctantly? This second scenario plays itself in many homes today. We don’t know how it was, but this much we so know. When told “*the Lord has need of it,*” they gave it. **They had a donkey, so Jesus had a donkey.** If they do not share it with Jesus, the Palm Sunday Triumphal Entry does not happen. The events of Holy Week do not occur as we know them. Perhaps Jesus is not crucified and we remain trapped in our sin. If so, then we have no Savior and no hope. They did, however, share their donkey with Jesus.
Because they did, we are freed from the power of Sin and Death.

Are you prepared to share with Jesus what he needs? Even your most valued possessions? You are not required to be Jesus' disciple, even though he invites you to be. If you choose to be, know this: God uses people of this world and the things of this world to accomplish divine purposes. God is not shy about asking for your best. God will not take from you what he needs, you must give it. When you do, God can do extraordinary things through ordinary people just like us.

Sources:

1. The idea for this sermon series came from my friend, Rev. Dr. Robert Simmons, while he was pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church, in Goodyear, Arizona.
2. Ibid.
3. Bruce Larson, *The Communicator's Commentary*, Luke, Vol. 3, Word, p. 282