

ANIMAL TALES: A DONKEY'S BURDEN

Matthew 21, Mark 11, Luke 19 and John 12

3.28.21

SERIES INTRODUCTION

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. . . . And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so. God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good — Genesis 1:1, 24-25.

Think about that — before we were ever here, the animals were here. An amazing, beautiful, perfect world, and they beat us to it. I have often wondered what they thought of it all — no troubles, no struggles, no predators. Just a beautiful place to live and grow and play. And considering Christ's words from Matthew 10 — *"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care"* — *Jesus Christ, Matthew 10:29* — I've also wondered if God ever had the opportunity to spend time with His creation. He obviously loved them very much. I wonder if He ever played with a dog or ran alongside a cheetah or swam with a shark or listened to a cat purr its contentment at being so near its Creator. Fun to think about. It would have been great if their world could have remained just as they found it.

But Paul tells us that one sad, bad day, their wonderful, beautiful world did change, through no fault of their own. Sin happened and, as a result — *the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time* — *Paul, Romans 8:22.*

As nature suffered for the sins of man, I wonder what they must have been wondering when God, in the human form of Jesus Christ, came to this planet to offer a way out of its bondage to sin. With that in mind, I have felt led to tell the stories of Holy Week through the perspective of animals — which is why this year's Easter series is called "Animal Tales." We are going to be highlighting three animals in particular who play a major role in defining these incredible events that all take place through the miracle of God's love and grace. I hope this perspective brings a great deal of joy and meaning to your reflections on the greatest, most consequential week in all of human history. Now on Thursday, we will be telling the story of the Last Supper and the establishment of a New Covenant through the selfless exchange made by a lamb. And on Easter Sunday, we will be declaring the triumph that is God's raising from the dead His crucified Son Jesus — the "Lion of Judah." But today, we're going to be telling the story of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, a day we commemorate as "Palm Sunday." The story takes place in the SW part of Israel, in a region of Roman rule called "Judea." And we're going to be telling the story of this incredible day through the eyes of one who had the privilege of carrying his Master into Jerusalem — a donkey. So, let's begin, **first with a word of prayer.**

SERMON INTRODUCTION

Greetings! My name is Kye. That's a Hebrew name that means "living near a narrow channel." My master's little boy Benjamin named me after the only donkey who ever talked — after being beaten for walking too close to a wall and crushing his rider's foot. Well, now, God is letting me talk too, to tell you all an amazing story about a rider I once had. Now I gotta tell you something — I've always kinda gotten the idea that most people think a donkey is just kind of a dumb animal, good for nothing but carrying things and pulling things. And yeah, I guess you'd say we're mostly work animals. But did you know that donkeys have also carried kings? That's right, including a king name David; one of my great-great-great somebodies carried him. Anyway, when this particular story takes place, I was really young, so young that I was pretty much kept with my mom — so young, in fact, that I had never carried anybody anywhere until one particular day.

TEXT (Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-44; John 12:12-19)

([Jesus] went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem — Luke 19:28b.) As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage (and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives — Luke 19:29a), Jesus sent two [of His] disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her (which no one has ever ridden — Mark 11:2b). Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them (and will send it back here shortly — Mark 11:3b), and he will send them right away" — Matthew 21:1-3.

It started out just like any other day — just me hanging out with my mom. (By the way, that's my mom next to me; isn't she pretty?) Anyway, a couple of men came into our yard; I'd never seen them before. They came right over to Mom and me and started untying us. I was scared. What's happening, I thought. And who are these guys?

(Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as He had told them — Luke 19:32). (The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them — Matthew 21:6.) They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people [the owners — Luke 19:33a] standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" They answered as Jesus had told them to — [They replied, "The Lord needs it" — Luke 19:34], and the people let them go — Mark 11:4-6.

That's when my master came out of the house. Good, I thought; he'll get this figured out. "What are you men doing untying that colt?" I heard him say. But he didn't seem angry or suspicious at all. It was like he just wanted to make sure he knew what they were doing. And one of the men replied, "The Lord needs it." And that must have been enough; my master let them take my mom and me away. And so off we started.

We came to a place where there were a number of men who looked like they had been waiting for us. I could hear them talking about getting us ready to give somebody — I think I heard the name "Jesus" — a ride. They came to me and started putting cloaks on my back to make the rider comfortable. I whispered to my mom, "Mom, what are they doing?" And she told me, "It looks like they're getting you ready to give somebody a ride." Then I asked, "But if there's only one person getting a ride, why do they need the

both of us?” And my mom said, “Since this is the first time you’ve had someone on your back, they just want to make sure you feel relaxed.” But something was still bothering me: “Mom, you’ve had plenty of riders before. Why not just use you?” And she looked me right in the eye and told me, “My precious little one, when people are giving a ride to somebody really important, they don’t want to use a donkey that’s given many rides. They want a donkey whose never given a ride — to anybody. That makes the ride, and the rider, extra special.” I could feel myself getting excited. “So you mean?” My mother completed my sentence: “The person riding on you must be incredibly important, maybe the most important person who ever lived.” Wow, I thought. Who ever thought this could happen to me. But then I asked, “Mom, you’ll be coming with me, right?” And my mom nuzzled me with the side of her face and said, “I wouldn’t miss this for the world!”

They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on — Matthew 21:7. When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, He sat on it — Mark 11:7.

Well soon all the cloaks they wanted were sitting on me. How do you think I look? Anyway, soon I heard some footsteps coming, and somebody said, “Here’s your colt, Master.” And without a word, I soon felt the weight of this man that everyone there was calling “master” or “rabbi.” Wow, this guy must be important! And we began our walk, my mom right next to me.

The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches [they had cut in the fields — Mark 11:8b] and went out to meet Him — John 12:12-13a. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road — Matthew 21:8. Now the crowd that was with Him when He called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that He had performed this sign, went out to meet Him — John 12:17-18.

It was easy to see where we were heading. This really big city, a place called Jerusalem, lay a little way off. But it was what was happening right in front of me that was the most startling. People were running towards us — from everywhere! And the things they were doing: They were taking off their outer cloaks and laying them in the road. Others were bringing palm branches they had cut in the fields, and they were laying those in the road. It seemed to be a great celebration — and it kinda reminded me of something I’d seen before.

When my master’s son Benjamin would be playing sometimes, he would ride my mom or one of the other donkeys, but always pretend for some reason that he was on a big, strong, beautiful horse, and then he’d yell so everyone could hear him, “Get out of the road. I am the great Roman general Benjamin. See all the prisoners I’ve captured and the treasures I’ve found. I deserve this triumph! I deserve honor and glory!” I guess that’s what horses are for — for celebrating winners in wars and letting people see how great somebody is. But I wasn’t any kind of beautiful warhorse, leading a general in triumph. I was a donkey,

leading somebody important — but important for what? If this wasn't about winning a war, what was it about — winning a peace?

And then I thought about my rider. In some ways, this seemed a bit like Benjamin's pretend "triumph," only this rider wasn't bragging — about anything. In fact, he seemed very gentle. I enjoyed how He rode me. But there certainly was some kind of celebration going on: More and more people seemed to be coming from everywhere to get close to the road, and to see this Man I was carrying. And they were getting louder with almost every step I was taking. I began to listen to what they were shouting:

"Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" [**"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" — Mark 11:10a**] [**"Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" — Luke 19:38**]. [**"Blessed is the king of Israel!" — John 12:13b**]. **"Hosanna in the highest heaven!" — Matthew 21:9 (quoting Psalm 118:25-26).**

Things like "Hosanna" and "Blessed is He." I heard the words "king of Israel." Some people were even saying, "Hey, isn't that the one who raised that dead guy back to life? Lazarus, right?" And all of a sudden, I started feeling an excitement deep inside me. There had been an odd and strange familiarity when I first felt this Man sit on my back. How could that be, I thought; I'd never carried anybody. That made me start thinking: "Is this guy more than just an ordinary man? Could this be the celebration that a king has arrived? Am I carrying someone of majesty?" And the shouting and praising of the crowd, and the cloaks and palm branches being laid in the road, continued.

This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: "Say to Daughter Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey'" — Matthew 21:4-5 (quoting Zechariah 9:9).

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 these things had been done to Him — John 12:16.

One of the men who had been with us from the beginning of this parade said to one of his friends, "You know, this reminds me of one of the old prophecies that said, if I remember it right, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.' You think that prophecy is about the master?" I wonder if they ever found out.

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" "I tell you," He replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out" — Luke 19:39-40.

And then some guys in these real fancy robes started calling out to my rider Jesus from that huge crowd; to be honest, I'm not sure how He even heard them, so they must have really been bellowing. Anyway, they were saying, "Hey Jesus, would You tell Your disciples to be quiet? They shouldn't be saying those things — hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord — especially if they're saying that stuff about you." And then my rider said something that made everything clear for me: "You know something?" He said, "If you quiet these people, then every stone you see around us will be shouting in

their place.” And all of a sudden it hit me — this wasn’t just a man riding on me. Or a king either, at least not like people would think of that. No wonder He felt so at ease on my back. He was my Creator! He made me. In fact, He made everything. Only somebody like a Creator could make nature shout like people. And only a Creator could make life where there was none. I’ll never forget the shiver I got when I realized that; I’m surprised I didn’t shiver my rider right off. And you know something? All these years later, I still haven’t stopped shivering.

As He approached Jerusalem and saw the city, He wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace — but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you” — Luke 19:41-44.

And then something completely unexpected happened. We were at a point in the road where the big city of Jerusalem was just laying out in front of us; it was beautiful. But just as I was taking in the view, everybody stopped. And everybody started looking at my rider. I couldn’t see Him but I listened, and He was . . . crying. How could that be? Wasn’t this day a complete triumph? How could He be crying? But then His crying became louder and more painful, making what seemed to have been triumph start feeling a lot more like tragedy, like somebody He loved more than anything had just died. He was speaking as He wept, telling everyone there the agony He felt for their sakes. I didn’t understand: He was the Creator. Why should He be so brokenhearted for His creation? But it seemed that He was willing to do anything to save His creation from being destroyed. Wow, I thought; does anybody in this crowd realize how much He must love them?

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?” The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee” — Matthew 21:10-11. So the Pharisees said to one another, “See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after Him!” — John 12:19.

Now I know I’m only a donkey but even I had come to understand who this was. This was my Creator, which made Him God, which made Him . . . everything. He was truly a king — the King of the whole universe. And they called Him a “prophet?” He was so much more, but it seemed so few really wanted to know that.

Well, that’s my story. And I thank you for allowing me this time to tell you about what it really was like that day when I brought my Creator in triumph to His people. And I hope you and I have one thing in common, even if I am just a donkey — that just like me, it makes you shiver to realize who my rider was, and what He wanted to accomplish for everybody. His name is Jesus. Someday I hope to see Him again and maybe, just maybe, He’ll let me take Him for another ride. Why not? That was the greatest day of my life. Farewell!

APPLICATION

Quite a day. Jesus finally allowed people to worship who He was, as the one who came in the name of the Lord. For years He had forbid people to tell others who He was. On this day, He let all praise to Him become a proclamation to be heard! And it was also a day full of some incredible contrasts that, despite the fact that He came into Jerusalem riding a donkey, a symbol of peace, He also came as a conqueror, but yet as a conqueror:

- 1) Who “knocks” on our heart’s door (Revelation 3:20). He could overwhelm us with force, He could blow the hinges clean off that “door,” but instead He reaches out with love, grace and mercy.
- 2) Who is humble and gentle versus proud and belligerent.
- 3) Who would conquer in the name of peace, a peace that passes all understanding. His transportation was His ID: You see, whenever a ruler arrived in a place while riding a donkey, that was understood to communicate that that king was arriving in peace, with no hostile intentions. Jesus came to replace our sin with His peace. He came with hostility toward sin, but He came with love for us.
- 4) Who came not to be served but to serve and, ultimately, to give His life as a ransom, a payment, to satisfy the debt of sin that God had charged to humanity’s account.

CONCLUSION

The week still has much more to tell us. On Thursday evening, we’ll be letting a little lamb tell the story of an object lesson we continue to tell some 2,000 years after Christ first shared it. It’s the sacrament of communion, and it will be ours to share then. Let’s pray!