

Keep Calm and Donkey On
Mark 11:1-18
Elizabeth M. Deibert

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Isn't it good to know that even when you are a donkey known by a different name, Jesus chooses you! Jesus chooses the lowly, the despised, the rejected. Donkeys are not noble steeds. They are beasts of burden – working animals, often found in lower socio-economic areas of the world. They are sometimes a little stubborn, less than eager to please. And yet, this animal plays a key role in the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The quote from the prophet Zechariah, chapter 9, verse 9, adds weight to this story for the Jewish hearers of the Gospels and for us, who read the Hebrew scriptures backwards, seeing Christ in the prophecies we read there: *Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.* Some of the Gospels call Jesus' ride a colt, others a donkey and a colt. Matthew's Gospel could lead one to believe Jesus has a foot on each.

But Mark, who rarely goes into great detail, spends quite a bit of time describing the act of choosing the donkey, the one never ridden, totally inexperienced donkey. Apparently a donkey is not easily forced to do something, as they are not as eager to please as a horse. But Jesus apparently achieved good cooperation from this never-ridden young donkey. Legend has it that the donkey was so faithful to Christ that he, unlike the disciples and unlike us, stayed with Christ continually, all the way to the cross, that as Jesus died, a shadow in the shape of the cross was permanently cast on the donkey's back, and that is why all donkeys have a cross shape on their backs.

It becomes clear as today's reading continues past the parade that remaining faithful to Jesus beyond the glory of palm branches and a carpet of coats and loud, chanting crowds is more difficult, especially as the tension with religious authorities begins to mount.

Mark 11:1-18

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ² and said 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. ³ If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" ⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" ⁶ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" ¹¹ Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve. ¹² On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. ¹³ Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴ He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it. ¹⁵ Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; ¹⁶ and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷ He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." ¹⁸ And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. (NRSV)

The disciples could have argued when Jesus asked for the donkey, but they kept calm and went on with his instruction. The by-standers could have raised a ruckus when the disciples were taking the donkey colt but with little explanation, they allowed it to happen. The donkey could bucked and brayed. He could have been too willful for Jesus to ride, but he cooperated. The people could have ignored Jesus because he was not on a noble steed. They could have rejected him then, but no, they had witnessed healings, and other miracles. They were wowed by his teachings and captured by his love.

The fig tree was not impressed by the presence of Jesus. It carried on with being leafy and did not rise to fruitfulness in the presence of Jesus. This is symbolic of those who rejected Jesus – and of his disappointment over that. The people selling and buying in the temple did not change their ways until Jesus demanded it. Jesus insisted that God’s house should be a place of prayer. His authority which calls forth loyalty from many is a threat to those in power. They cannot have someone asserting himself above their control. He makes them very nervous and must be arrested and killed.

How is it with you and Jesus? Are you willing to be Jesus’ servant, directed by him? Are you willing to submit to his will, or do you want to take a ride on Jesus’ back – turning him into the One who serves you? Who has the reins – you or Christ? Whose house is that – ours or God’s? It has a cross on it now, reminding us of the calling we have to bear one another’s burdens. Are we willing to bear that load, and to make God’s house more significant than our house – in terms of our commitment? Scripture says, “Everything in heaven and on earth belongs to you and of your own do we give you, O God.” Is that how we see it?

Are you willing to be fruitful and generous whenever Jesus is hungry? Or is it on your time-table, your sensibilities? No Jesus, I am busy growing leaves now. Need I remind you that Christ said, “When I was hungry, you gave me no food...and they said, “Lord, when? When did we see you hungry?” And he said, “whenever you did it to the least of these my people, you did it to me.”

I wonder if this one week, we might devote daily ourselves to serving Christ, loving him with more commitment than ever before. Just like the donkey, never before ridden, got untied, I wonder if we might get untied from what binds us, from what keeps us from being Jesus' donkeys, the ones who carry his load. And I wonder if we might help other donkeys get untied for service to Jesus by listening and not questioning the voice of our Savior when he chooses that donkey or that one. We're all the beloved of God, no matter how much of a donkey we are. When the powerful who are not walking with Jesus are wondering how they might undermine his authority, and kill him, we keep calm and donkey on. I wonder if we might be fruitful both in and out of season – not just telling Jesus that we already gave our figs, our peaches last season, or last capital campaign. Not just saying that we carried the ministry load last season, so we're done. No it is always time for fruitfulness in the presence of the one who loves us so much that he is willing to humbly go to his death to show us.

Just one year ago on Palm Sunday, there were courageous Christian martyrs in two Coptic Orthodox Christian congregations in Egypt who were worshipping when bombs killed forty people and injured another 100. And here's another part of the story you may not have heard last year: There was a deacon who had a premonition and told his wife he thought he would be a martyr. He encouraged her to sit at the back of the church with their young daughter, instead of with him that day in the front. And another part of the story: there was a nearby Anglican congregation, who heard the bombs and they were minutes from serving communion. They continued to share that moment of communion, because in their fear, they knew what they most needed was communion with their Savior and friend, Jesus.

Friends, this is the week, this is the season, this is the year, this is the lifetime to follow Christ all the way to the cross and linger in the shadows long enough that the mark of our Christian baptism becomes a cross on our backs, where we carry the load, a permanent sign that we are true followers, not just the fair weather friends of Jesus.