

Sermon #1,013: Numbers 22:21-35

3-24-13 (Palm Sunday, the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent), Bethany-Princeton MN

A DONKEY FOR THE LORD'S USE

Prayer: O Jesus Christ, Author and Finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before You endured the cross, despising the shame: We thank and praise You for Your unspeakable love, which moved You to do battle in our stead and to gain the glorious victory for us, Your spiritual Israel. Enlighten our eyes, that we may behold the mysteries of the suffering of Your holy soul wherein You won our cause before the tribunal of supreme Justice. Let our thoughts draw near unto the infinite fervor of Your love, that our hearts may thereby be enkindled with fervent love toward You, our precious Redeemer. Hear us, we pray, for Your infinite love's sake, You who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen.

*(The Lutheran Liturgy, companion altar book for The Lutheran Hymnal)*

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

If they had really known and understood where Jesus was riding, they would have said, *No, not there, not down that road, don't keep going that way!*

There is a little naivete in the people's praises on Palm Sunday. They are somewhat uninformed. Who are these people? Not only are the 12 disciples with Jesus, but a whole crowd of people going up to Jerusalem, and as the custom was, all the people in the city are coming out to welcome the new arrivals. So it's a very accurate, eyewitness description when St. Matthew writes, *"the multitudes who went before and those who followed,"* all joined in *"crying out, saying, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!'"* It's a joyful scene. It's a parade.

The children actually are not mentioned in this scene, but surely they were part of "the multitudes." Later that day the children are singled out by the unhappy chief priests and scribes, who (St. Matthew says) *"were indignant"* specifically because of *"the children crying out in the temple and saying, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!'"* What the multitudes were doing, we might call naïve, since

they lacked the information about Jesus' purpose for riding into Jerusalem. But it was something children could appreciate and participate in. So really this is childlike. The childlike response to Jesus riding on the donkey is to take joy in it.

This was disturbing to some other people who were there, namely the twelve disciples. They knew very well what was happening. Jesus had just told them, for the third time according to the gospels: *"We are going up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished. For He will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked and insulted and spit upon. They will scourge Him and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again"* (Lk 18:31-33). When Jesus said that, the disciples did not respond. *"They understood none of these things,"* is what the gospels say about it. It wasn't as if they were ignorant or uninformed. They just didn't want to hear it.

For the disciples this was an old and unwelcome discussion. When they did try to respond and say such things as *"Lord, this shall not happen to You!"*, He rebuked them sharply, even calling one of them *"Satan"* for saying it. So they would just be quiet about it. They knew why Jesus was riding into Jerusalem. If they too were smiling and singing, joining in the festive mood, it was because it was a welcome distraction. If they thought it would do any good, the disciples would say: *No, not there, not down that road, don't keep going that way!* Later they said it in their actions. Peter strikes with his sword as Jesus is arrested; when He goes too far down this road He's on, they all abandon Him.

This brings us to the Bible's other story involving a donkey. In Balaam we meet another someone who says: *No, not there, not down that road, don't keep going that way!* What do you know or remember about Balaam and his donkey? It's that the donkey spoke in human words. **"The LORD opened the mouth of the donkey,"** the Bible says. But what's more important is why this happened.

Balaam shows up in the further adventures of the children of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. He was not an Israelite, nor did he convert to the true faith. He was a Mesopotamian prophet. Israel's enemies requested that he utter curses on them, and offered him money. He knew enough about the true God to be afraid enough of Him, that he asked God about it first. At first Balaam said no to the Moabite king. But after they offered him more money, he asked God to let him do as they wanted. Knowing it was against God's will, he still set off down that road -- the wrong road. Going, as Jesus says, on "*the broad path that leads to destruction.*" Psalm 1 says, "*Blessed is the man who walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly nor standeth in the path of sinners.*"

So when his donkey turned off of that road, it was a good thing. It was good to get out of the path of the ungodly, to get out of the broad path that leads to destruction. The donkey "**went into the field,**" and although that doesn't seem like much of a path soon Balaam found himself in "**a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on this side and a wall on that side,**" and a little later "**in a narrow place where there was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left.**" Then comes the memorable part of the story, when the donkey lies down, Balaam hits the donkey, and the donkey speaks in human language.

But in the telling of this story I have left out the most important person. We tell this story as the story of Balaam and his donkey. But there's a third character in this story. The donkey left the path because it "**saw the Angel of the LORD standing in the way**" – the road – "**with a drawn sword in His hand.**" It is the Angel of the LORD – the One who had appeared to Abraham and others, who led Israel out of Egypt in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, in other words God Himself; in fact He is the Son of God prior to becoming flesh, He is Christ more than 1,400 years before He became Jesus.

He is the one who came and directed the donkey so that it could only go on the narrow path of God's choosing, and couldn't go to the right or to the left. He was there not for Balaam's sake but because He loved Israel. He was not willing that His people should be cursed, or be under any curse. Previously, before Balaam set out with his donkey, the LORD said to him, *"You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed"* (Nu 22:12). He loved His people so much that He came into the broad path that leads to destruction, which Balaam was on, and stood there so that he could not advance farther. He was there with a sword, and He would have used it if necessary: **"If she [the donkey] had not turned aside from Me, surely I would also have killed you by now, and let her live."**

This is not the picture of Christ that we are used to seeing. It is not what we see of Him on Palm Sunday. But there are times when we wish He would come like this, and bring His sword, open our eyes as he opened Balaam's, keep us from continuing down the wrong path, the path of sinners and the ungodly, forcibly move us back onto the right path. Can He come put a stop to my child's lying, or talking back? Can He come and stand in front of my teenage child so they don't go down the path of premarital sex, drug use, and being unfriended? Can He come where I am, and seemingly can't stop myself from wasting time, complaining about others, dabbling in pornographic images, giving snide comments, or joining in with the sinful swearing that others do? Being made to turn aside from the wrong road is appealing, due to how our human efforts fail.

But this is the road of the Law. What we see in this story, where Balaam and his donkey could not **"turn either to the right hand or to the left,"** is how God told Moses to state the Law, the Commandments, to His people: *"You shall be careful to do as the LORD your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left"* (Dt 5:32). This is the language of the Law.

The Bible pictures the Law as a path down which you walk. As you know all too well, however, you are not careful enough and you stray from that road. The irony in Balaam's story is that he is more stubborn than a donkey. So are we all!

The road defeats us. The road of the Law never ends. The solution is not that we can ask Christ to come and make us not turn aside to the right or the left. His way is not the way of the sword. What He did when He showed up mysteriously in Balaam's path, the way of threatening and of the Law, for Christ that is what we call his "foreign" or unnatural work. He does not want to do that. He does not love to do that. And in the end, in itself, it doesn't save anybody. He will not – cannot -- force anyone into His kingdom, or to avoid the wrong and do the right. It is not that He lacks power, but that it is not His way.

But He does show up on that road, the endless road of the Law, the road of obedience where we fail to obey. This is what we see on Palm Sunday. St. Paul writes that "*Christ is the end of the law for righteousness*" (Ro 10:4). The road of the Law ends at Christ. He is there for you. This is the Gospel. It is what we call His "proper" work, His natural work, it's His nature, not to condemn but to save.

He is on that road, He is on the donkey, to bear the burden of obedience for you, to bear all the sins for you. It is the end of the road for you, but not in the usual sense, not that it's time for you to be judged and answer for everything you've done, but it's the end of the road for you because He says it is time, the set time has come, for Him to be judged instead of you and for what you have done, and He will answer for everything you have done.

He changes the Law road into a Gospel road. He faces you with no sword. He is not afraid that you will laugh at Him coming to you unarmed, and that you would continue uncaring down the path of sin. He comes to you armed only with His wounds and His scars. He shows you that He has carried your heavy

burden. If you have sins, He points to His back and says He has already carried them. If the donkey could speak to you, it would tell you the same. Jesus chose a beast of burden so that He could carry your burden. So He could be the burden, the burden of your sin. The donkey would only agree that Jesus carried your burden on its back. He carried it to the cross. He buried it in His tomb. He took the lashes for you. He bled for you. There is nothing for you to carry. He has made an easy road for you, not that this life is easy or smooth but that He has made the rough places of your sins smooth by the forgiveness He won for you.

Jesus just says, "Come, walk with Me. My yoke is easy and my burden is light. My Word is a lamp for your feet and a light for your path." With your hand in His, you walk on the narrow path willingly, laughing like a child, with the pure joy that is only possible in His presence, all the way into eternity. Amen!