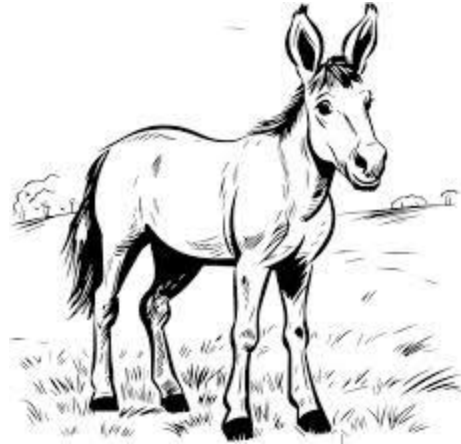


# Untied

Mark 11: 1-10

Rev. Dr. Dawn Jeffers Ramstad

Palm Sunday 2024



“What are you doing, untying the colt?”

Mark 11:5

Recently, John and I have been streaming *Fixer to Fabulous*<sup>i</sup> as a show we both enjoy. Dave and Jenny Marrs live in Arkansas where they renovate homes. Like me, Jenny Marrs likes sheep. Unlike me, Jenny lives on a forty-acre farm so she can have a hobby herd. In season one, they were having trouble with cougars attacking her ewes and lambs, so Dave gave her a donkey, “Daddy-Donk.”<sup>ii</sup> Donkeys and cougars are natural enemies. Therefor donkeys roaming among a flock of sheep are excellent deterrents for protecting sheep from cougars. As a suburban knitter who loves both sheep and the dogs who protect them, I have never met anyone who had a donkey to protect their sheep. I needed to learn more, which has been interesting.

I did not expect my new interest in donkeys to be sermon material. Then one of my knitting friends asked me how I find new sermons to preach during Holy Week. My answer was that while I do use the same scriptures every year, I am not the same person every year, nor do I have the same congregation I had the year before. Our conversation left me challenged to find something new to preach on both Palm Sunday and Easter. This year my new take on our old story comes from my current fascination with donkeys.

This sermon began as all my sermons do, by carefully reading my Bible. This year our assigned reading is from Mark. The first thing I noticed is that there are no palm branches in Mark. But there is a donkey. Why did Jesus ride a donkey? How did Jesus know where two of his twelve primary disciples could go to get a donkey?

When it comes to the first question, “Why did Jesus ride a donkey?”, all my Bible studies material had the same answer, Zechariah 9:9. “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.” By living out this 600-year-old prophecy about the coming Messiah, Jesus was saying to all who saw him ride that young donkey that he believed he was the Christ. That is a very straight forward answer to why.

Next, we wonder how Jesus knew where his two disciples would find this young donkey. Every gospel is clear that Jesus knew there would be a donkey tied up, waiting for them. We have three options to consider. It could be that Jesus knew because he was fully divine. It could be Jesus knew because he had friends in Bethany, and he may have planned with them. The third option is to add option one to option two: Jesus knew because he was divine and had a plan. Not one of the four gospel writers, cared how Jesus knew the donkey would be tied up and waiting.

My two favorite commentaries on Mark were written by Presbyterians, and both pointed out that when Martin Luther and John Calvin preached this passage, they saw the donkey as a symbol for us.<sup>iii</sup> In their sermons both Luther and Calvin would have asked, “How are we like the donkey?” What a good question for us!

**How are we like the donkey?** That is so easy, Jesus the Christ needs us. Just as Jesus needed the donkey to tell Jews in occupied Jerusalem that he was the promised Christ, Christ needs us in the upper Midwest 21<sup>st</sup> century to tell others about how Christ has touched our lives.

Jason Lewis posted a sermon starter on the donkey in Mark 11. Like Luther and Calvin, Lewis challenged his fellow preachers to see ourselves as donkeys. Lewis answered his own challenge saying, “Jesus knew me before I knew him. He chose me before I knew him. When he sent for me, I was all tied up—addiction, sin, worthlessness.”<sup>iv</sup>

**“Jesus knew me before I knew him.”** That certainly seems to be true for the donkey’s colt he rode into Jerusalem. Jesus knew he was going to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, but he could not afford to stay in Jerusalem. We know he had friends in nearby Bethany—Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. In Hebrew the town name “Bethany” combines two words, one meaning “home” and the other “poor.” A map in the back of a Bible shows us Bethany was both a Jerusalem suburb and neighbored land only suited for herding sheep. Donkeys have been domesticated in that part of the world for about 5000 years and they are still used in subsistence farming. Not only do donkeys protect sheep, even now they also serve as a beast of burden for those too poor to own a tractor

and a jenny's milk is a good source of protein for humans. Jesus did not ride a jenny (a mature female donkey); he rode a colt (a male donkey less than a year old). He did not take the family's nutrition, just the young beast of burden he needed. Jesus knew he needed a donkey's colt long before the colt knew he was needed.

Does Christ with his divine wisdom also have a plan for you? At the end of a long life, we might reflect and how Christ impacted for our lives. But it is equally possible at any stage of life that like the donkey's colt we too are tied up with no idea what Christ has planned. That was true for Martin Luther, and it was true for Martin Luther King, Jr. Both had no idea how God was preparing them to change the course of human history until one night when lightning struck Martin Luther and another night when a knock on the door came for MLK.

**“Jesus chose me before I chose him.”** This is a hard truth for our culture. We believe in freedom of choice. We all accept the truth of these words from our Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>v</sup> We Americans believe God gave us choice. How could it be that Jesus chose me before I chose him?

The donkey's colt was tied and waiting for two disciples to bring him to Christ. Clearly, Christ chose the donkey before the donkey accepted that Jesus meant to ride him. So, if each of us is like the donkey, how in your life have you seen Christ choosing you before you chose him? All Methodist preachers, from local lay speakers to bishops presiding over an annual conference know this phenomena. In fact, one of the best signs that someone will make a good preacher is that they were called by others to the office, they did not seek it out for themselves.

It certainly has been true for me related to our dementia friendly ministry. In 1998 I would have described my call as “to minister to children and their families.” I was checking off education experiences to be ordained, including a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). I applied to do my unit as a chaplain at Lucille Packard Children's Hospital on the campus of Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. The CPE supervisor who interviewed me worked in the Veterans Administration Hospitals and asked me specifically if I was interested in veterans. She pointed out that an opening for a chaplain intern was in Livermore, close to our home, and did not require overnight or weekend hours away from my three children. I said “. . . not really, my call is to

minister to children and their families.” I drove home over the Dunbarton Bridge. There, half way across San Francisco Bay, I clearly heard God say, “You know veterans have families, too.”

The next morning, I called the supervisor. She was surprised because she needed to call me. I told her I was willing to consider the Livermore VA opening. She told me, the Children’s Hospital CPE supervisor had just decided to take a renewal leave that summer. That my friends is how Christ called me from children’s ministry to dementia family ministry.

**“When he sent for me; I was all tied up.”** Jason Lewis said he was all tied up with “addiction, sin, and worthlessness.” Martin Luther was all tied up with his father’s expectation for his life. Martin Luther King, Jr. was tied up with the demands of a local church and American racism. I was tied up with my own life plan and raising three children in an affluent suburb. What is keeping you tied up? What ropes in your life do you need Christ to untie because he needs you?

All donkeys have two purposes, to carry burdens and to protect their herds and families. Girl donkeys, jennies, also have the purpose of nursing their young and providing milk for their human families. Their purposes are the same now as they were the day Jesus needed one colt to carry him so everyone could know he is the Christ.

What purpose does Christ have for you? What is keeping you tied up from fulfilling your purpose? Do you trust that Christ has a plan and disciples to set you free to fulfill it?

I do hope you just said “Amen.”

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<sup>i</sup> Home & Garden Television (HGTV), Hulu. First episode, 10/22/2019.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/jenny.marrs/photos/amidst-so-much-uncertainty-and-in-the-spirit-of-providing-yourdailysmile-i-intro/3631138063622885/> Accessed on 2024.03.21.

<sup>iii</sup> William C. Placher, *Mark: Belief: A theological commentary on the Bible*. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2012.

Lamar Williamson, Jr. *Mark: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. John Knox Press, Louisville, 1983.

<sup>iv</sup> Jason Lewis, “Sermon Idea for Palm Sunday, Mark 11:1-11. *Obserjasons*, YouTube. Posted on 2022.04.07. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYa-gpgSTmg&t=2s>. Accessed on 2024.03.21.

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>. Accessed on 2024.03.23.