

[Luke 19:29-40](#)

“Untied and unleashed”

- Have you all heard about the elephant and its rope? ¹
 - For you who have not, the story goes that a person was passing by and noticed that there were elephants tied up
 - Now the funny thing was that these elephants’ legs were tied with a tiny rope
 - At any moment, the elephant could snap the rope, or even the pole to which it was connected, and walk away
 - I mean, it is a full grown elephant. There is not much that can stop it should it want to run away
 - The person asked one of the trainers why these beautiful and magnificent animals just stood there and never tried to get free
 - Well, it turns out that if you tie this rope to their feet when they are very young and not strong enough yet to break the rope
 - The elephant will grow up believing that it can not
 - Then no matter how big or how strong they get, they never use their full strength and never realize what they can do
 - They never try to break free again.
 - The rope, while never standing a chance compared to the elephant’s physical size and strength
 - Was firmly tied to its mind and its own understanding of the world
 - There is a lot to unpack and a lot here that us humans have in common with those elephants, am I right?
 - And I think from a spiritual perspective too, because I think we see this very thing in action in the scene set for us by our Gospel reading today
 - Two parades really, a Roman procession into the city, and Jesus riding a donkey
 - Rome’s parade is exactly like you would expect from Rome and empire and control

¹ <https://thewespot.com/the-elephant-and-the-rope-what-you-believe-is-powerful/>

- The truth that it broadcasts firmly embedded into our minds with a rope that seems unbreakable
- And another parade of donkeys and people that have managed to be untied and unleashed.
- Every time I preach on Palm Sunday, I talk about these two parades
 - Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan suggested that Rome would be having one of its military parades in very close proximity to Jesus' own procession ²
 - Rome was also known for its spectacular parades, and perhaps even cultures before it
 - In Rome, military parades were a favorite, celebrating a victory in battle
 - When a victorious military commander would return, he would parade through the streets in a ceremony called Rome Triumph³
 - Behind him would be the spoils of war: gold, weapons, captured prisoners of war, and even artwork depicting the battles
 - It is even recorded by Tertullian that a slave would sit behind the commander and remind whisper in his ear:
 - “Memento Mori”, remember that you are mortal
 - Just to make sure the commander remembered that tomorrow he could be brought down
 - That this amazing and extravagant parade should not go to his head
 - Rome was likely bringing in military reinforcements in preparation for the Passover
 - Remember- the Passover was a feast celebrated by Jews to remember their freedom from Egypt
 - Yet they were not free- they were not even citizens of the Empire
 - Passover meant civil disobedience, unrest, and often violent protest
 - The Military demonstrations were to bring in extra fire power, and to remind everyone who was in charge, and why it would remain that way
 - Parades, after all, were reserved for the victorious, the conquerors, the powerful
 - They were celebrations of how things were.
 - They were reminders of the rope tightly fixed around everyone's legs.

² Crossan, John Dominic and Borg, Marcus J., *The Last Week: the day by day account of Jesus' final week in Jerusalem*, 2006, Chapter 1 Palm Sunday

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_triumph

- Perhaps then we can imagine how Jesus' procession into Jerusalem would have only added to the tension between him and the ruling authorities
 - While the military was entering Jerusalem with its mighty horses and chariots
 - As Jesus rode along, the people put their cloaks in the road as a sign of respect and of making the path easier
 - Our reading of the Gospel of Luke today doesn't offer many more details, but the gospels of Matthew and Mark give us more
 - It is in their recording of this event that palm branches are spread along the road, forming the basis for our own use of palms today
 - Matthew and Mark also record that as Jesus rode by, the people shouted "Hosanna!"
 - "Blessed is the King who comes in the Name of the Lord"
 - These two parades happening that day in Jerusalem might have brought mixed emotions to the people of the day,
 - First, Jesus' parade seemed to mock Rome and its military
 - Jesus had no army- Jesus was not even free himself, yet he was riding in as a victorious commander
 - He certainly was no King- yet the people were shouting it
 - It had to have been a mix of cynicism, that they would ever be free of Roman rule
 - Combined with the frustrations of all oppressed peoples longing for freedom
 - With that touch of humor layered on top in the absurd, the crazy nothing-to-lose jubilation that was shown here
 - And of course the energy was only building
 - This parade would have made anyone associated with Rome a little nervous
 - No wonder some of the Pharisees asked Jesus to get the disciples to stop
 - They feared it would bring down Rome's wrath on all them!
 - When Jesus untied and rode that donkey into Jerusalem, he knew the mixed emotions people would feel
 - Perhaps he was feeling them too
- That donkey, being untied, that's what captured my mind this year

- It echos a prophecy in Zechariah that says “your king comes to you... riding on a donkey.” (Zech 9:9)⁴
- It is the animal princes would ride to signify peaceful intentions⁵
- This animal had never been ridden before
- The verb used here for untied is both literal and figurative, it can mean to break apart, to melt, to dissolve, to loose
- The donkey was waiting for this moment to be unleashed for its purpose: to carry God in the flesh to a stuck world
- Perhaps that applies to you and me a little as well.
- For the gospel of Luke, Jerusalem represented Jesus’ death
 - It can easily be argued that this procession assured Jesus’ clash with the authorities and his crucifixion
 - This was the event they could not ignore or tolerate
 - Jesus was determined to go forward, even with that very real danger
 - Because his ultimate goal was too important
 - In Luke’s Gospel, there is no crowd shouting Hosannah who then later turn to crucify like in Matthew and Mark
 - Luke’s Gospel is political. It is commentary on how humans are from birth tied to believing that Rome’s way is the only way.
 - But Jesus was riding towards God’s new vision for the world, what he called the kingdom of God
 - Where justice, equality, and love reign, rather than the might of an army.
 - When we all have unmediated access to our God, our creator, and our salvation
 - When our value is seen as intrinsic rather than earned or assigned by birth.
 - You see, in Jesus’ parade, everyone gets to march
 - It’s a parade for the downtrodden and the depressed
 - The angry and the anxious
 - Those without homes, those fleeing their homes, and those with big, hollow homes.
 - It is a parade for the sick, the broken, and the invisible and ignored, and those who suffer from being in the public eye.

⁴ *Feasting on the Word*, Year C Palm Sunday, Exegetical Perspective, 155-7

⁵ *Feasting on the Word*, Year C Palm Sunday, Theological Perspective, 155

- For the lonely, the tired, the hopeless,... and for those tired of pretending they are not.
- For those whom the world has told you are worth something **only** because of what you can produce, and only while you produce it
 - Or only because you can consume it
- Those who have tried and failed, and those who cannot not even try.
- And for those whom the world finds worthless, extra, annoying, and dispensable.
- It's a parade that crosses time, culture, geography, and politics
- This is God's parade. Our parade.
- This is the purpose for which we are untied, for which we are unleashed
- If these two parades were held today, which one would you go see?
 - It is a hard thing to answer. Rome's parade would have certainly been a grand spectacle. Entertaining.
 - Reassuring to those in positions of power and privilege
 - A good place to see and be seen by those that matter
 - All of us want to be associated with winners, with success, with power
 - If we are honest, so many of the tethers that held together the Roman Empire and its influence, still have hold of the world today
 - The rope is tied tightly around us that keeps us locked into a might equals right mentality
 - That the best way to have peace is to violently silent the dissenters
 - That it is better to oppress than to be oppressed
 - That violence is the best path to victory
 - And yet God wants to untie us from that. Unleash us from it.
 - Show us that there is a better way
 - And in order to do it, Jesus will go all the way to the cross this week
 - Jesus will love all the way to the end, through humiliation, suffering, defeat, and even death
 - This is what it means to worship a God who suffered, died, and still was not overcome.
 - To finally show us that it is not the world's way of doing things that is ultimately freeing
 - The path to resurrection is instead the path of love.
 - Untie our hearts Jesus, from the world of sin that we know so well
 - And unleash us to the world of love.

Amen.