

Message: We Need Him

Have you ever been working on something and you didn't have what you needed to complete the task? Last week, Esperanza was working on a Bible study for children. Her lesson used a craft as the centerpiece. The night before, she sat down to assemble everything she needed for the class: paper, scissors, colored markers...everything except glue. She needed glue to hold it all together. She came and asked me if we had any glue. Unfortunately, we didn't. So, early Sunday morning before church, she went to a higher authority: she asked our church council president if the church had any glue. Viola! a tube of Elmer's appeared. Everything went well and the children learned a lesson about God's love.

Like many of us, Esperanza needed something simple so a task could be completed. The item needed was important, but it paled in comparison to the overall goal: to share God's love with others.

Jesus experienced the same thing on his last trip to Jerusalem.

Jesus was on a mission. His mission was to share God's love with everyone in Jerusalem and, in time, the rest of the world. Jesus came to complete his mission, but before he could do so, he needed something. He needed a donkey. Now Jesus didn't need just any donkey. He needed a young donkey, a colt that had never been ridden.

Why? Well, it's not because Jesus was tired. Jesus and the disciples walked everywhere, traveling tens and hundreds of miles up and down the hilly country of Galilee, Judah and Israel. No. Jesus needed the donkey because he was sending a message. The words of Zechariah 9:9 prophesy the coming of Israel's deliverer, *“Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”*

Jesus fulfilled Hebrew scripture, our Old Testament, by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. And he did so in style. Let me offer a little perspective. **What's your favorite sports car?** Perhaps it's a Corvette or a Porsche. For some of you, it might be a Jaguar or maybe a high-end

Mercedes, Acura or Lexus. Nice cars aren't just transportation, they're a luxury item because they are costly to maintain, keep and run well.

The same would be true in the first century for a donkey that's old enough to be, but has not yet been, ridden. The care, feeding and housing of animals isn't cheap today. Bills can run upwards of \$700/month, not including veterinarian costs and other intangibles. If you think that's expensive, imagine living in a country where 70% of the population barely scraped by. Most people in Jesus' time had a sustenance level of living, meaning they planted a garden, bartered their time and services, and put their children and elderly relatives to work. In other words, people did everything and anything they could to raise enough money or grow enough food to be able to survive. Owning an un-ridden donkey would be an extravagant luxury, a mode of transportation most people couldn't, and wouldn't want to, afford.

When Jesus sent the disciples to get the donkey, he was essentially asking the unknown, un-named owners to lend their new sports car to someone they didn't know, so he could take it for a drive. You know how that conversation would go today, “hey, I hear you just got a new car. I want to take it for a test drive up the hill. Do you mind?” You know what we would say, “are you kidding?” Do you think the owners would ask any questions? Absolutely! The two disciples Jesus sent knew it, too.

Yet what did Jesus tell the disciples to say? “The Lord needs it” (v31). What I find amazing is the disciples didn't ask any more questions. They went and found the colt exactly where Jesus said it would be. And, when they were asked by the owners, “*what do you think you're doing?*”, the disciples said, “*the Lord [God] needs the colt*” (vv33-34, paraphrase). Even more amazing is that the owners let them take the colt without any further questions. The fact that Jesus asked was enough. It was enough for the disciples. It was enough for the donkey's owners, whether they knew who Jesus was or not. No one knew what it meant for Jesus to be the Son of God, because he had not died and risen. However, all of the people involved knew this: when the Lord God asks, say “yes.”

We say "yes" for a couple of reasons. First, it's a good idea to say "yes" when the God of the universe, who created you and everything around you, asks for something. To say "no" is to disobey the all-knowing, all-powerful God. That's not the best way to live a long and happy life. Second, we say "yes" because we know and believe that God only has good things in mind for us. That's the promise of Jeremiah 29:11, "*For I know the plans I have for you,*" declares the LORD, "*plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*" God loves us and we love him in return, so we trust God and say "yes" whenever we're prompted by God's Spirit.

Jesus needs people to trust, love and follow him, because that's the only way to meet the greater goal: to save us! Jesus came to save us from the crippling power of sin, which kills our spirit, leaving us dead to God's love and presence. We need *him* to save *us*, not the other way around! That's what the word "Hosanna" means; help, save me! Jesus needs us to answer his call, to believe, and tell others he is our Savior and King. Our need is greater than his by far. Jesus is the Son of God! He doesn't need parades of palms or strewn clothing when he has the praise of angels and heavenly beings filling his ears. We need him!

Jesus needed people. He needed his parents, Mary and Joseph, to bring him into the world and care for him as a child and a young man. Jesus' parents encouraged him and made sure he was raised well so he was prepared for his ministry. Jesus needed his disciples, because they were those who helped him with his daily tasks, cared for him and because they would carry on his work after he died. Jesus needed those unnamed donkey owners to obey God and let him use their precious animal, not because of the value of the animal, but because it was the right colt, at the right time, in the right place.

The time and place was determined by God Almighty and, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the prophets of the Old Testament prophesied what was to come. Jesus is the promised king, the anointed one, sent by God to his chosen people and to all people, everywhere. We need him because without him, life will be filled with trials, hardship and, eventually death, all without hope.

There’s a divine paradox here. In vv31-34, we read about Jesus’ need and how he relied on his disciples and others to respond when he asked them to trust and say “yes.” Emmanuel, God with us, showed his humanity by reaching out and inviting other people to be part of his triumph. In vv35-38, the crowd shows Jesus signs of respect and they rejoice, praising God. They shout out loud, “*Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!*” The divinity of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, is revealed in the words, actions and love of the crowd.

Jesus’ ride through the gates of Jerusalem was seen as a triumph for his disciples, family and friends from Galilee. That’s who was in the crowd cheering him on. But not everyone shared the same view or was glad to see him. In particular, the Pharisees, who were the church lay members, were very unhappy. To them, Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem couldn’t have happened at a worse time.

Historians believe the population of Jerusalem was between 30,000-35,000 people on any given day. But on high holidays, like Yom Kippur and Passover, the population of the city would swell to be 100,000-130,000 people. Everyone was getting ready for Passover, visiting the temple to make preparations for their sacrificial lamb, arranging for a room and place to cook their Seder meal, and completing temple preparations.

When Jesus entered the city in the middle of a crowd of people waving palms, spreading their cloaks on the ground, riding on the back of a colt, it was the equivalent of a charismatic, anti-church street preacher entering our church service this morning to the accompaniment of a brass band playing “Hail to the Chief.” It would shock some people and draw the attention of others away from what was already going on.

All the signs and symbols would fit the law of Moses and the traditional way of honoring a king. The people who spread their cloaks for Jesus were following a thousand year old tradition, as we know from 1 Kings 9:13 when, “*Jehu said, “Here is what he [the prophet] told me: ‘This is what the LORD says: I anoint you king over Israel.’” They [his men] quickly took their cloaks and spread them*

under him on the bare steps. Then they blew the trumpet and shouted, “Jehu is king!” When the crowd spread their clothing on the road, they were following a well-known tradition used to honor a king.

The people waving palms in celebration of Jesus were following Moses’ law in Leviticus 23:40, *“on the first day, the day of Sabbath rest, you are to take branches from luxuriant trees - from palms, willows and other leafy trees - and rejoice before the LORD your God.”* It was right then and it’s right today for us to celebrate Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem as a sign of our joy before God.

Jesus needs us. He needs us to respond when he calls so his divine work will continue, in, with and through us. Jesus asks us to willingly give to him that which is most valuable – our possessions, our money, our time and our very heart, mind, body and soul, all that we are, all that we have and all that we will be. When we do that, God’s promise is fulfilled. We’re part of the crowd, praising God, rejoicing at the coming of his Son and shaking up the status quo in a world that’s lost and struggling to find purpose and meaning.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem knowing the odds were against him. He knew there was about as much chance of permanent change as there was for the stones of the Temple to starting shouting out loud. Jesus rode into the capital city anyway, despite the odds against human nature changing and despite the fact he never intended to be a king in this world.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem anyway. In spite of the hard heartedness and stubbornness of the people, he rode in on a colt. In spite of the hate, envy, self-interest and material dreams of those he came to save, he rode in to the shouts of *“Hosanna.”* In spite of the bitterness, suffering, betrayal and pain to come, he rode in as an act of love and grace.

Jesus needs us and calls us to answer. We can either say “yes” and be a disciple or say “no” and be his executioner. There is no middle ground! We either accept or reject him. This week, I invite you to ride the streets of the Via Dolorosa with Jesus to be saved and transformed, for we need him, his love and hope now more than ever. Amen.

Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29 (NIV)

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. Let Israel say: “His love endures forever.” Open for me the gates of the righteous; I will enter and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD through which the righteous may enter. I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation. The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. The LORD has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad. LORD, save us! LORD, grant us success! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. From the house of the LORD we bless you. The LORD is God, and he has made his light shine on us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will praise you; you are my God, and I will exalt you. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.

Luke 19:28-40 (NIV)

After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it.’” Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” They replied, “The Lord needs it.” They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” 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.”