

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH



SERMON

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Izzy's Story

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Dear God

So many voices swirl around us shaping our desires.

Silence all the whispers and shouts.

Help us to grasp your truth, spoken in unlikely and startling ways.

Amen.

In the Book of Numbers, a man named Balaam whips his donkey for disobeying. This story tells of the abuse my ancient ancestor endured even as he risked everything to protect its master. Only when Balaam threatens to kill does he finally listen to the donkey...A donkey who literally saves his life.

Known as the story of “Balaam’s talking donkey,” it is one within a pattern of donkeys like me who see, hear, and carry a divine message. Besides the snake, we donkeys are the only animal known to speak in scripture.

My name is Izzy. Even though they put me out to pasture, no longer able to work, I still have breath to tell you my story of when I was oh so very young.

About forty years ago, a man called Jesus sent and rode atop me when he entered Jerusalem. I always wondered if anyone cared to ask me about that day that signaled the world was

about to change. Now a gospel called Mark pieced together the stories of his life, including that moment.

First, listen to the way Mark describes it.

Mark 11:1-11

11 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples ²and 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.

³If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this: ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’ ”

⁴They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” ⁶They told them what Jesus had said, and they allowed them to take it.

⁷Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields.

⁹Then 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!”

¹¹Then 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.

That's Mark's story.

I'm the donkey that carried the most influential man to walk this earth.

My big ears hear what you humans miss. More than that, since some people consider me too stupid, they rarely hesitate from using raw language to describe their deepest desires around me. I listen to what they want. And some people tell me things they'd never breath to another human being, letting me carry their fears, a thirst for revenge, or their wildest imagination.

Here is how it began.

Jesus sent two men to untie me. While walking back, they grumbled about a request to sit on either side of Jesus, after he'd come to glory. What's wrong with that? After all, Jesus began his ministry by calling people to change their hearts and minds because the Kingdom of God had come near. All that kingdom language persuaded them to follow. Couldn't they ascend above the others, enjoy places of honor given the risks they took? All his predictions of suffering, dying and rising sounded like nonsense.

They brought me to Jesus. Laid cloaks on me. Gently, he climbed on my back.

When we entered Jerusalem. I saw a carnival of people.

That day, some of the crowd clearly came spoiling for a riot. Several years ago, Herod took off the head of John the Baptist to squash a revival. For years, so many courageous men and women died when politicians feared their ability to rally the people.

I noticed that some in the crowd came with daggers and pitchforks at the ready. These peasants simmered with rage, wanting to overthrow the occupying forces of Rome and

return Jerusalem to glory. They wanted a warrior to be their messiah.

Even though silent, they might as well have shouted their intent. In days of old, parades of people threw down their cloaks to welcome a victor. I saw them *wink-wink* to their comrades as if to say, “put down your cloaks and let him incite our revolution.”

Behind them stood the people wearied from a never-ending toil to pay taxes. They labored to feed Herod's greed. I could almost see them paralyzed by the Roman boot on their throats. Bloodshed never entered their minds, only the hunger for freedom.

These people waved palms, recalling Moses leading the people from bondage into the promised land. Their branches begged for release.

Some in the crowd knew of Jesus' power to enact miracles, to calm troubled seas, multiply bread, and bring the dead back to life. They came looking for a magician or sorcerer or anyone to heal their brokenness, to ensure their children would not starve, or to end their bodily pain.

They wanted to be seen as human and not some object to humiliate or scorn. As a beast of burden, I can relate to that.

When this collection of souls shouted “Hosanna” I imaged all those donkeys before me who carried the victors, the princes bringing peace into war torn cities who heard, “Hosanna! Save us!” In their own way, they expected Jesus to be “the one” to fulfil scriptures to suit their desires.

I also saw those in the crowd those who cared nothing for faith.

They wanted to protect their prejudices, keep the strange estranged, exile the sick, push out the weak. They wanted nothing to do with Jesus.

Others wanted to trade their loyalty for privilege.

For the first time, I saw evil, coming from a desire to torture another, whether an enemy or just a scapegoat. These donkey eyes witnessed the savage human heart.

That was Sunday. In the days that followed, oh how the crowd changed. So much for their ideals of deliverance.

Before the week ended, all that pomp and parade faded into humiliation and mockery. By the next Sunday, they either forgot the man I carried or considered him as one more body in the long line of disappointments.

Don't you want to know what I felt?

He whispered to me. He said, just like the prophet Zechariah foretold, he chose me, a young, never-ridden colt of a donkey. God made me for this very, sacred purpose. Even though I thought I'd rather jump and race when untied, his gentleness calmed rather than startled me. I still feel the tingle of his touch.

He told me that my presence alone communicated peace. I am the type of beast a prince would ride to signify peace. He planned to resist the forces of death with the truth of love.

Since then, I've wanted nothing more all my life than to carry grace, his strength, his love for creation.

Later that week, on the Friday when the earth fell dark at mid-day, my gentle rider breathed his last on the cross, and the earth shook, breaking that bloody Temple. None of those parade goers celebrated.

The writer of the gospel has no idea where his disciples, those who'd untied me, hid. He writes that the man they called messiah died alone.

That was then.

That path we traveled is now saturated with blood. In the intervening years, the Romans mounted a feeble attempt to silence the crowds that came to believe. They destroyed the temple and slaughtered thousands of people.

I've seen so much death in the past forty years. And I've heard stories of hope spreading through all the land, changing the lives of all who believe.

Recently, those who trust in his resurrection have started to relive his final week each year.

They began to celebrate a Palm Sunday. They wave their palms not to deny their fear, or death, or underestimate the enemies that will kill the good news. As they wave their palms, they examine their souls: do they honor his way of living and loving?

They tell the stories, hoping to never forget his courage, the cost, the pain, and the power of enduring love.

We are growing to understand what he meant by the Kingdom of God. It rises from the hearts and minds of those who seek fierce justice and offer lavish mercy.

There is a choice to be made that is not always an easy or obvious. It is not the choice to be on one winning side or another. It is never to divide or conquer.

It is the choice to join the dream of a world not yet fully here. It is the choice to glimpse the divine in the everyday, everyone, and everyplace. It is the choice to believe ourselves precious – but no more so than any other creature. It is to be grateful to be last and encourage those who have less to go before us.

To choose the Kingdom of God over the empire is to choose his way of the cross. It is a demanding way. It is also the way of foolish wisdom and deep peace more than security and certainty.

I know what it feels like to carry him. That grown man of physical strength weighed nothing. Carrying his grace felt like a feather that gave me wings. Imagine a donkey flying.

I carried this memory my entire life and now you know my story.

It's your turn to tell this story with your life. It's your turn to stand before all the world with the word of truth – to bear witness to a life neither death nor anything else could destroy.

First, you have to want to walk with Jesus.



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