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*The Lord Needs It*  
Palm Sunday Sermon: Luke 19:28-40  
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I have new appreciation for the logistics of Palm Sunday. Last fall, on my trip to the Holy Land, we gathered at the Mount of Olives, where Jesus began his journey into Jerusalem. We had our morning devotion on the top of the Mount of Olives, where we could look out and see the city of Jerusalem. Then, even though it was the middle of October, someone handed out palm branches, and we walked down the road from the Mount of Olives, retracing the path that Jesus would have taken on that day long ago.

Something you don't really grasp until you see it for yourself is how HILLY this area is. For our palm procession today at church, we got/get to walk on nice, flat, ground. But the road that Jesus used was steep, and narrow, with lots of twists and turns and zig zags to it.

At the end of our time in Israel, some of us traveled on to Jordan to visit Petra, a huge, ancient city that was built into the rock walls of the mountains by a people called the Naboteans. We all hiked down to that famous Treasury building that you can see in the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, but then we were given some free time, so my mom and I joined a little group that chose to hike up to the ruins of the Monastery of Petra. This would would take us to the highest point in Petra, and this was the longest and most challenging of our hiking options. It was long, it was hot, it was steep, and we had to watch where we were going, because some of the pathways were pretty narrow, and we sure didn't want to fall off the side down into the rocks.

About halfway up, two guys who were in our tour group, but not in our little hiking group, lurched passed us on a couple of donkeys. If you chose, you COULD pay a guide something like 30, 40, or 50 bucks, and he'd put you on a donkey and lead you up most of the way. These two guys were a little sheepish, because here we were doing it on foot, while they

were riding, and one of them said, “Yeah, we figured with our knees we wouldn’t make it up here on our own, so we’re doing this.” And a number of tourists did this, so that we hikers had to watch out for these donkeys, who knew exactly where they were going and exactly what they were doing. The donkeys were in charge, not the people riding them. When we heard a donkey coming, we’d back up with our backs against the rock walls, because we were expected to make way for them, not the other way around.

But in watching those who rode up those rocky paths on those donkeys, I have to say, it didn’t look fun. Again, we’re talking steep, rocky twists and turns here, not Kansas Avenue. These riders were lurching and leaning and bouncing and hanging on for dear life, and when we finally met up with the two men from our tour group later, I said, “As far as I’m concerned, you get just as much credit for getting up here as the hikers, because what you were doing looked way scarier.”

The point being . . . Jesus did not HAVE to ride a donkey into Jerusalem. It would have been easier and more comfortable if he had just walked. He chose to ride a donkey for a reason. He had a purpose.

Today we are concluding a sermon series based on part of our new mission statement, which is: Loving God, loving neighbors and living with purpose. Living with purpose means following Jesus and his teachings, living so that our lives bear witness to God’s love and grace. In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus acts with great purpose. He deliberately enters the holy city of Jerusalem, knowing this is where he will be killed, and it will happen soon.

His followers cannot contain themselves. They’ve seen or heard about Jesus healing people, feeding people, casting out demons, and raising a widow’s son and a little girl from the dead, calming the sea, even inspiring a rich tax collector name Zacchaeus to give up his way of

life and his wealth, and they shout their praise: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.”

It’s an interesting coincidence that the final season of the mega-hit series *Game of Thrones* begins tonight, the evening of Palm Sunday. I can’t in good conscience recommend this series to you because of the graphic violence and nudity, BUT—it is a great source for royal processions. One of the main characters in the show likes to make her entrance flanked not only by an army of warriors wearing full armor and carrying sharp spears, but also with her three fire-breathing dragons. Her processions are calculated to show off her power, to convince the rest of the world that they, too, should bend the knee and call her their queen.

The entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem is the opposite—just a guy on a donkey. No war horse, no weapons, no armor, no chariot, no soldiers, not even a bodyguard at his side. Donkeys are not big, or scary. You don’t use a donkey on the battlefield. If someone is riding past you on a donkey, you can reach out and touch them.

Jesus rides a donkey in part to fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament, in particular the prophecy found in Zechariah 9, “Rejoice greatly, Daughter of Zion—your king comes to you righteous and victorious, riding on the colt of a donkey.” But he also rides a donkey to demonstrate that he is not a king who conquers people, but a king who will die for them. And when he sees the city, he weeps for it, saying, “If only you knew the things that lead to peace.”

Luke’s Gospel goes into some detail to explain that Jesus gets this donkey by telling two disciples, “Go on ahead to this village, and when you enter it you will find a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here, and if anyone asks why, just say, ‘The Lord needs it.’”

First of all, I don’t think the fact that Jesus rides an animal that has not been ridden before, and rides it downhill through a big crowd, gets enough attention, but that’s a detail for

another day. Second, donkeys are valuable! They're the pickup trucks and tractors of the ancient world, and in many parts of the world still today. Imagine you buy a brand-new pickup, and you get it home and park it in your driveway, and after a while a stranger comes along and gets in it, and starts to drive it away, and you run out and want to know what's going on, and they say, "The Lord needs it." Would that work for you?

The procession into Jerusalem was a team effort. It took Jesus, and trusting disciples, a crowd of enthusiastic followers, and a donkey. It wouldn't have been the same without the donkey. Which means, it also took someone willing to let the donkey go, someone who heard the disciples explain that "The Lord needs it," and responded, OK. (Now, I always assume that the owner eventually got the donkey back, but who knows. . . )

It got me thinking . . . what does the Lord need from me? What does the Lord need from me, to help bring peace to this world? The famous verse, Micah 6:8, asks and answers this question, "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

I don't have any donkeys, but I had a moment this week when I was busy trying to complete some tasks in my office before hopping in the car to drive to Salina for a meeting with some presbytery colleagues. Lori came in and said, "There's a woman here who wants a pastor to pray with her." And I thought, oh, gee, I don't have time for that. I need to finish this stuff up and get going. But the Lord needed me to stop, and go pray with this woman, Alexandra, who had had her five children taken away and placed in foster care. Sometimes walking humbly means giving up our agenda so that we can be part of God's agenda.

Sometimes the Lord needs our time. Sometimes the Lord needs our attention. Sometimes the Lord needs us to just chill out and trust that he really is holding us in the palm of his hand.

Sometimes the Lord needs our material resources, whether it's donkeys or a portion of our income. Sometimes the Lord needs us to extend a little more grace and acceptance to family member. Sometimes the Lord needs us to let go of how things have been, so that the Lord can bring something new.

Sometimes the Lord needs us to contribute to peace in the world by apologizing to someone we have hurt, or by forgiving someone who has hurt us. Those of you who went to the lunch with John and Gwen Haspels last week will remember Gwen's story about practicing forgiveness. People ask her, how was she able to forgive the man who attacked her and John as they were driving in Ethiopia one day, going about their business as Presbyterian mission workers, and shot her in the face so that half of her face was just gone. She's had to have something like 13 different surgeries in the last two years to reconstruct it.

Gwen explained that she has been practicing forgiveness all her life. She talked about learning to forgive her husband for leaving her alone so much with the children when they were small, and he had to be out in the different villages preaching the good news. By continually practicing it, Gwen built up her forgiveness muscles over many years, so that by the time she was attacked, it was second nature. It wasn't OK that she was shot, but she could release any burden of resentment and bitterness for the pain and suffering she endured. Today, when Gwen and John want to teach people about forgiveness and reconciliation, you better believe people listen to them.

What does the Lord need from you today? What does the Lord need from us, from this church, today? Can we let him have it? As we begin this holy week, I invite you to sit with this question for a few minutes every day, as you ponder the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Amen.

