

Sunday, April 5, 2020 – Palm Sunday & Forward in Freedom IV
“Freedom to Move Forward”

John 12: 12-19

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Adapted from CJ Spring 2011

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,
Amen.

Perhaps you've seen the old movie clips about the welcome home those in the military received at the end of World War II. Flags lined the parade route. Applause and shouts of thanksgiving could be heard as the line of cars drove by. Paper and streamers swirled in the wind. One look at the celebration and you knew immediately it was a victory parade. I wonder if such an event will be in store when we finally get through our current situation, the research team that gets to the vaccine first feted before the world?

Things haven't changed much since Jesus' day. When a king conquered another nation or a general captured a city, he returned to a celebration. Since paper wasn't available, many waved palm branches, a symbol of victory. People would come out of the city to welcome home the victors. Shouts and cheers would go up around the city. The king would ride triumphant on his mighty steed. One look at this ancient celebration and you knew immediately it was a victory parade.

Jesus rides into Jerusalem to begin the last week of his life before Easter. People are following him into the city. Jerusalem is packed with people who have come to celebrate the religious festival called the Passover. Many of those in the city come out to join the crowds that are already showering Jesus with praise. Palm branches are being waved in victory. People are chanting "hosanna." They are shouting out that Jesus is the king of Israel. One look at this celebration and you know immediately it's a victory parade... but a donkey?! Not in a chariot, not on a mighty horse... no, a young donkey that hasn't been ridden before. It's not been in a war. It's not impressive. It's a donkey.

And yet, the donkey is the key to what Jesus's victory was all about. Verse 16 says the disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered. It seems the disciples weren't paying attention to the donkey during this victory parade. If they had, they might have understood just what kind of victory Jesus would bring. The

same is true for us. We know about the palms, the people shouting, but our eyes need to focus on the donkey. Because the donkey points out the enemies Jesus came to defeat.

Who were Jesus's enemies? Well, the people back then thought it was the Romans who had conquered Israel and had soldiers all over the place. They were hoping that Jesus would bring Israel back to its glory days of King David. They were hoping they would be free and secure, protected from anybody ever oppressing them again. And it was true that the Romans could be considered Jesus's enemy since they nailed him to the cross.

But the list of enemies only begins with the Romans. A greater enemy turns out to be his own people, the religious leaders, the Pharisees and chief priests. Just a few days before this victory parade, Jesus did an incredible miracle. His friend Lazarus had died. He had been in a tomb four days. Jesus comes and with a simple command, "Lazarus, come out," Jesus brought his friend back to life again. No wonder so many people were following Jesus into Jerusalem and coming out to meet him.

But behind the scenes, the religious leaders gathered together. The heart of the discussion went like this, "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." During the victory parade, they accused each other, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him."

The next step by these enemies was to get Judas to betray Jesus. Then they would arrest him, falsely accuse him, and condemn him to death. They would get the crowd to yell, "crucify him," instead of "hosanna." They would get the Romans to execute him. Jesus' enemies are some of his own people.

But we still haven't gone far enough. Jesus' enemies are not just his own people. An even greater enemy is what's driving the Pharisees and priests to do what they're doing. Jealousy—the people are following Jesus instead of them. Fear—they may lose their privileged position that gives them power. Hatred—Jesus is telling them they need to change their lives and follow him. Greed—Jesus attacks their money making schemes in the temple. Anger—they are upset that Jesus is letting the people worship him instead of God alone.

Now that brings all this closer to home, doesn't it? Greed, anger, hatred, jealousy, fear come from deep within all of us. We call it sin, and we know it as the dark places in our hearts and minds. We see it in the world around us – our short tempers, exacerbated by so much stress that breeds disunity in our families and among each other, our temptation to grab every sanitizer and Clorox wipe we can before someone else gets it, our fear leading us down a path of despair. A whole demonic world, led by Satan, tempts everyone to give in to these ugly enemies of Jesus.

But we still haven't gone far enough. One more enemy to name; it is our last and greatest enemy. Several years ago newspapers ran a cartoon (Wiley Miller, *Non Sequitur*, Oct. 29, 2010) playing off the then still pretty new GPS technology. In the cartoon, a box reads "The Inevitable Navigation System." The picture is of a cemetery, with a number of headstones and one grave, freshly dug. A car has driven into that open grave. The voice coming from the car is the GPS saying, "You have arrived at your destination." The comic strip uses humor to open our eyes to reality. The last great enemy we face is death itself, the punishment for greed, jealousy, anger, hatred, fear, and everything else that put Jesus on the donkey.

Do you see who the real enemies are? Not just some Roman soldiers or a few religious leaders back then. Jesus is going up against the very enemies that haunt us. He is going to battle against the dark places in our hearts and minds. He is taking on our worst enemies – sin, the wickedness that infests this world we live in, and Satan himself. His war is ultimately against our greatest enemy—death and the grave.

Jesus goes forward in freedom on the mission... on a donkey. Sounds strange, especially since the donkey was an animal of peace, not war. It was an animal that conveyed humility and gentleness, not violence and bloodshed.

But a war was going on, and Jesus would ride forward in freedom into the worst of what his enemies, our enemies, would do to him. He would not resort to violence, but the Romans beat him up. He was manhandled and whipped to within an inch of his life. And blood was shed. Not the blood of the Romans, the Pharisees, the priests or the people who yelled out "crucify him," but Jesus' blood. He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, humble and gentle, seeking to bring peace. Indeed, he was the prince of peace. And his enemies, our enemies, attacked him.

So how did Jesus gain the victory? He let those enemies do their worst to him. He did not stop the violence done to him. He willingly went, forward in freedom to the cross. All our greed, fear, hatred, jealousy, anger, sin, evil, and death surrounded him. And when darkness covered the earth, it looked like those enemies had won.

But we know better. We know of a morning that shattered the darkest places of sin and evil. We know of a stone that was rolled away and of the hatred, jealousy, fear, anger and greed that had been overcome by the prince of peace. We know of a savior who rises from the dead to defeat death once and for all and thereby set us free!

And then the disciples understood. Jesus's victory was bigger than pushing back a few soldiers or greedy, threatened religious leaders. His victory was over everything sin and death could do to us. And it came by riding into town on a donkey. It came by way of a cross. It came because of his victorious resurrection from the dead.

And the victory parade has been going on ever since. Every hymn of praise we sing is added to the sounds of the parade. Every prayer we say raises the volume of that celebration. Every day we follow Jesus in faith and obedience, we're joining the crowds who followed Jesus that first Palm Sunday. Every act of devotion and love for Jesus is like the palms being waved once again. Today, in this service, from your device screen in your home and everyday, in our lives of love and devotion, we join in a victory parade that takes us to an eternity with Jesus.

It's that victory Jesus won that sets us free to keep moving forward, too. Four Sundays ago, our last Sunday together worshipping in the sanctuary we kicked off the informal phase of our capital campaign, called Forward in Freedom. The campaign was over a year in the making. These past four Sundays Pastor Brad and I have kept up the campaign theme but in a very different way than we ever imagined it. We didn't imagine a generational emergency and stay at home orders from the governor. And no doubt, our focus has shifted, purposely. We are stretching out the campaign, into the fall, and you won't be hearing about the "capital" part of the capital campaign this spring – a necessary concession to our new reality. But hear me clearly – stretched out, elongated... but it's not cancelled, it's not postponed. We're already in it, still in it, we'll still sprinkle in discussion of future ministry plans – because ministry is going to keep taking place here!

In fact, ministry is taking place here. In the midst of disease, death and fear Jesus' mission moves forward! You'd be proud to know the hard work our elementary teachers are doing in online instruction, the daily videos and chapel openings Mr. Schneider is doing, the extensive deliberation of the executive staff and the Board of Directors on opportunities like the CARES Act forgivable payroll loan for which we applied so we can continue to support our staff for whom we don't have hours, the packets and resources sent home by our preschool teachers for our families and the communications Donna has been sending to keep up with our families. And we're going to keep worshipping throughout Holy Week and beyond, thanks to Pastor Brad, Christin and others who've equipped us to be able to stream such as we are. We'll keep offering opportunities for Bible study, like the video studies Jon and Katie are doing, or the devotions Pastor Brad has sent home to you, and in prayer, in support for others who need it, connection with one another. That's not just you who've regularly attended Mountain View but others in our city looking for hope, and people in other parts of the country and the world. Invite people to worship with you! The Gospel is getting so much play online that there are fears about the tech infrastructure holding up to the crush of video streaming that will take place on Easter Sunday. Satan and the powers of evil think they're winning, but they're wrong. The same Jesus riding a lowly donkey is taking us, forward in freedom to the cross, knowing that our enemies' attempts to do their worst will end in Jesus' victory!

You see, the cartoon has it wrong. The inevitable navigation system will lead us to that enemy called death, but it is not our destination, only an event along the way. The final destination is an eternal parade, celebrating with all the saints the victory that Jesus won for us when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. So perhaps the better name for this victory parade is not Palm Sunday, but Donkey Sunday. In Jesus' name, Amen.