August 6, 2023

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THE POWER OF THE DONKEY

John 12:12-19

You should all thank me because when I was only 19 I saved the world from environmental disaster. It’s true, sort of. Well, not really. My parents had connections that helped Jerry and me get summer jobs when we were in college. Jerry got a job with the county road department on a crew that painted crosswalks and other signs on the surface of roads. I got a job with Occidental Petroleum as an engineer’s aide. Mine was the tough job. I had to work in an air conditioned office while Jerry got to be outside, on those black asphalt streets in 100 degree weather.

Okay, so maybe I had the cushier gig. But that first summer after my freshman year the days kind of dragged because it kind of seemed like they just made up work for me to do. For instance, at one point gave me an article to read and said he wanted me to look into this topic and give him my assessment. We’ve all heard of fracking. It actually has a long history because they were doing basically that way back then. But this article was about a whole new idea. Instead of drilling down and injecting water or steam to free up gas or oil, this suggested putting nuclear devices down there and setting them off! My assessment was this was a really bad idea for a number of reasons that I enumerated. So that idea was abandoned. You’re welcome.

The only thing is, my boss was way smarter and more knowledgeable than me. He didn’t need me to figure that out for him. It was just something for me to do. That summer they had me doing complicated calculations and making charts that I knew no one really needed or was going to use. I was thankful for the job, but the days went slowly because I wasn’t doing anything meaningful as fas as I could tell.

The second summer things changed dramatically. I was paired with a full time aide who had begun writing computer programs for the engineering department. I began helping him writing software. For instance, we wrote a massive program the analyzed mountains of data relating to oil leases that were becoming available in the North Sea. There were some the company wanted to get, and some they didn’t. The program identified which were the best leases as well as projecting the likely value of the others. The company had to make bids on all of them and needed to know what they should bid on the leases they didn’t want so they would just miss out.

That summer the days passed quickly because we were doing something interesting and meaningful. There was a purpose to it. I knew what we were supposed to do and why. I learned from that experience that life goes way better when you know what you are supposed to be doing and know it means something significant. That is true for all of us. We need to know what we should be doing and need to know there is a real purpose to it. In John 12:12-19 we are going to see from the example of Jesus what we should be doing and why.

JESUS TOOK A DRAMATIC STEP

In John 12:27 Jesus said, “Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour.” We have seen Jesus say the time wasn’t right for him, but in this chapter he said his time had come. He was going to openly declare that he was the Promised Messiah. There was no more avoiding, no more keeping secret his identity. He laid it all out in the open for all to see, knowing it would provoke a violent reaction.

John 11:56 says many of the people who came to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of the Unleavened Bread and the Passover were wondering about Jesus. “They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple courts they asked one another, ‘What do you think? Isn’t he coming to the festival at all?’”

Jewish people from all over the Empire came to celebrate that feast and observe the Passover. The city was jammed with pilgrims and many of them camped out in the hills around the city. Scholars say that the population more than doubled that week. For a couple of years there had been rumors and reports about this young teacher from Galilee who taught powerfully, but who also was able to do incredible things, actual miracles. There were rumblings that maybe this guy could be the long hoped for Messiah who was prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures. The buzz about this man seriously amped up when reports claiming he had brought a dead man back to life started circulating. At that point Jesus became *the story* in town. Lots of people were talking about him.

Everyone knew that if he was going to claim to be the Messiah he would have to stake that claim in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the heart and soul of Jewish life. It was the power center. In Psalm 2:6 God said, “I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.” Zion was in Jerusalem. If this guy wanted to be the king, he had to go to Jerusalem.

On that Sunday at the beginning of that feast week, Jesus finally entered Jerusalem. He had been there before, but this time he did it in a fashion that was intended to make a statement. People waved palm branches to greet Jesus. We know from the other Gospel writers that many of them also put cloaks down on the road in front of Jesus. What was that all about? The palm tree had become a symbol of ancient Judea. It was also symbolized by a fig tree and by a vineyard, but the palm tree had some historical significance for them.

In the second century BC Judea had been ruled by Syrian overlords. The Syrians pulled some seriously offensive stunts and desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem, the Jews’ holiest site. A Jewish man named Simon Maccabee led a revolt against the Syrians, and his forces were actually able to defeat them and drive them out of Jerusalem. Then he restored the temple. When that happened, the people waved palm branches. Ever after that the palm tree became a patriotic symbol for Israel. Some ancient Judean coins had palm trees on them. Every year the neighborhood next to ours has a parade for kids on the 4th of July. It has grown to considerable proportions. Tons of kids ride their bikes, wagons, skateboards all around the neighborhood. They are typically adorned with American flags and lots of red, white and blue decorations. Waving palm fronds at a parade in ancient Israel was like waving an American flag at a parade on Independence Day in our country today. It was a distinctly political and patriotic act.

Putting the clothes down on the road also had some political connotations. That was something people did when a king was coming to town. So it was essentially declaring Jesus to be king. But this became overt when the people began shouting and chanting. Verse 13 said they went out to greet Jesus shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the King of Israel.” Hosanna is actually a transliteration of a Hebrew expression into Greek. The original Hebrew words were *hoshia na*. Hoshia na was a plea to God meaning “Save us, now!”

This is a prayer all of us are familiar with. A couple of weeks ago on Sunday morning Laurie and I went out to our car to head for church. We had it all packed with the keyboard and sound equipment and my guitar, as well as some decorations Laurie puts on the back table. But the car wouldn’t start. We didn’t think it was the battery because we thought it was too soon for it to be dead, but it sure seemed like battery. But what were we going to do? We couldn’t just call someone to give us a ride because we had to get all that equipment to church. We essentially prayed “Hoshia na!” Save us, Lord. In other words, help! After a few anxious moments God answered our prayer. Our neighbor, Mark, a brother in Christ, came to our aid and jump started our car. God is good!

What you see in verse 13 is actually a quotation of Psalm 118:25-26. It was originally used for pilgrims on their way to worship in Jerusalem. But it had taken on messianic significance. Now it was used of Messiah, the King, coming to Jerusalem. By quoting this the people were proclaiming Jesus to be the Messiah, the King.

Matthew 21:10-11 says, “When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, ‘Who is this?’ The crowds answered, ‘This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.’” The word translated “stirred” meant, “caused to tremble, was agitated.” The whole city was affected. They were shaken, wondering what was going on.

JESUS MADE A CLEAR STATEMENT

Jesus walked everywhere he went. But this day was the exception. Instead of walking into the city he rode on a young donkey. Matthew’s account of these events informs us that Jesus set this up in advance. Apparently he made a reservation with Shekel Rent A Beast. His riding in on a donkey seems odd for a couple of reasons. The first is that it was so different for him. Why did he suddenly decide he needed to ride into town instead of walk? He had been to Jerusalem on a number of occasions before and always walked into town. So why the change? This was the only time he rode an animal. The second curious aspect of this was, why a donkey?

The simple answer to that question is that he was fulfilling a prophecy. Verse 15 is a quotation of Zechariah 9:9. “Do not be afraid, Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey’s colt.” This was a prophecy that Messiah would enter the city riding on a donkey. By taking this unusual action Jesus was making a clear claim to be the prophesied Messiah, the King of Israel.

Everyone understood that. Riding on the donkey, accepting the praise, the cries of “Hosanna” and the shouts “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord,” all were indications that Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah. “Luke 19:39 says, “Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, rebuke your disciples.’” They wanted him to tell his followers to calm down because he is not the Messiah. Jesus’ response to them in verse 40 was, “I tell you if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” If the people didn’t proclaim Jesus the Messiah, then God would see to it that the rocks would miraculously do it. That was as direct a response as Jesus could have given. I kind of wish the people hadn’t shouted. How cool it would have been to have rocks somehow shouting “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” I guess you could say that would have been the first rock concert. It also would have been the coolest one ever. That reply meant that having him be proclaimed the Messiah, the King of Israel, was going to happen because it was the will of God, for that is who he was.

Verse 19 says the Pharisees were frustrated. What they had been doing was getting them nowhere. They had made attempts to either arrest or kill Jesus, but had repeatedly failed. Then he would leave town. My suspicion is that when he left things died down and they hoped he would just go away. Now they realized that wasn’t going to work. It was just getting worse. They decided they had to come up with a more effective plan for getting rid of Jesus. What they ended up with was having the Romans do it for them, because the Romans didn’t care what the people thought.

What does any of this have to do with us, if anything? Actually it has some significant implications for us.

IMPLICATIONS

GOD HAS A DIFFERENT GAME PLAN THAN PEOPLE DO

It is astounding to think that on Sunday of that week Jesus entered Jerusalem to the shouts and praises of a large crowd. The whole city was affected, everyone was wondering what this was all about, who this guy was. Then a mere 5 days later Jesus was being nailed to a cross to different kinds of shouts as people jeered at him and mocked him. The main reason for that violent change was the leaders of the people now knew they absolutely had to get rid of Jesus. But part of the reason lay in the thinking of the common people.

The ancient Jews knew they were God’s chosen people. But there was an issue that weighed on them heavily. They really hadn’t been free for more than 500 years. They had been conquered and ruled by the Babylonians, then the Persians. The Persians were conquered by the Greeks, and they ruled over Israel for a time. Then came the Romans. The Roman rule was heavy on them. The Romans knew nothing of the true God and cared nothing for him. They were thoroughly pagan, and both lived and promulgated lifestyles that were blatant violations of much of God’s laws. They were totally unclean in the view of the Jewish people.

It was frustrating to the Jewish people that while they were God’s chosen people, then were powerless compared to Rome. It was pretty hard to make anyone believe the Jewish people were the chosen people of Almighty God, when they were weak and oppressed by the supposedly unclean Romans. Hey, you Jews, if your God is so powerful, how come you are so weak and helpless? How is it that the Romans know nothing of your supposed God and have no interest in him, but they are the most powerful people on the planet? It sure looks like either your God has no power, or he doesn’t care about you.

That was tough enough to take, but what really rankled was that the Romans were right there in their land, the holy land, ruling over them. They built a fortress to house their troops right next to the temple. To know how that angered the ancient Jews all you need to do is look at recent history. You probably know that before his death Osama Bin Laden signed a declaration of war against America along with several other Muslim radical leaders. It said, “Every Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded (must) comply with God’s order to kill Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it.” You believe in God and want to be rewarded by him? Then obey his order, God’s command, to kill Americans whenever and wherever you have the chance. Yikes. One of the main reasons for this was presence of American military personnel in Saudi Arabia, the land that gave birth to Islam. The very presence of infidel, unclean Americans in that holy land was cause to kill Americans. That’s not far from how the ancient Jews felt about the Romans in their land.

What made it even worse was the way the Romans ruled. They appointed the Jewish political and religious leaders. They determined how and when the Jews could practice their religion. They actually kept the chief priest’s holy robes and only let him use them when they deemed it acceptable. To top it all off, the Romans levied heavy taxes and used that money to fund their occupation of the land. One of the key issues that sparked the American revolution was that England taxed the American colonies but gave them no representation in parliament. No taxation without representation was a battle cry. The Romans were masters of taxation without representation and thought nothing of it.

Daniel had several visions about the future, including seeing the powers that would conquer Israel. Then in Daniel 7:13-14 he had another vision. He said, “There before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”

This was a vision of the Messiah. It said he was given sovereign power and authority. All peoples would worship him. His kingdom would never pass away. This was right in line with Isaiah 9:6-7, the familiar verses were the prophet said, “To us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.” He goes on in verse 7 to say of Messiah, “Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.”

There are prophecies that depict the time when Messiah rules as a time of unparalleled blessing, abundance, peace, and joy. Isaiah 35:5-6 says, “Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.” In verse 10 it says of those in Messiah’s kingdom, “Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.”

If you were an ancient Jew and knew those prophecies, what would you expect to happen when Messiah came? He is going to rule, not just over Israel, but over the entire world. And his rule will bring peace. But even more, there will be blessing and miracles. People will be healed and become whole, Israel would be wealthy and powerful. Now Jesus is entering Jerusalem, and clearly claiming to be that Messiah. He has demonstrated power to heal people. The blind, the lame, the deaf have been healed, and he even brought a dead man back to life. It seems he is beginning to fulfill those prophecies right before your eyes.

So when the ancient people of Judea were crying, “Hosanna, blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord,” this is what they are asking for. Now the Romans are going to get theirs. Sure, they have their mighty legions. But our Messiah somehow is going to have power over them and will defeat them. And he will gain power over the whole world. His kingdom will never end, and we’re going to be secure and rich and healthy! We’re going to have more joy than we ever knew it was possible to have.

What the people were hoping for was that their lives in this world were going to get way better. Their circumstances were going to improve beyond measure. That was what they wanted. They wanted Rome to get pummeled, they wanted to be free of Rome, they wanted Israel to have power, they wanted to be safe and they wanted to have material wealth beyond their dreams. If they had that, that was all they could ask for. They thought that was the Messiah Plan.

This is where this incident intersects with our lives. We think we want much the same things. We are not concerned about Rome, but we are concerned with our version of what they wanted. We want the powerful people who control things in our world and who are opposed to what we believe, who promote lifestyles abhorrent to God, to get their comeuppance. We want security, plenty, health, peace and joy. We want our circumstances to get better so we can have a great life right now.

Here’s the bad news. That was not God’s plan then, and it is not his plan now. In every sport coaches create game plans. I remember years ago a coach in the NHL who heavily emphasized every player on the team playing lock down defense first. He was not always popular with his players. I can understand that. I coached kids hockey teams for a number of years in my son’s youth, and I observed something that was always true. The kids wanted to score goals. That was what they focused on. That doesn’t go away when they grow up. That coach’s rationale was sound. If you don’t give up goals, you don’t have to score much to win. And if you play strong defense, you are likely to frustrate the other team and get them to make mistakes, which will allow you to score enough to win. But what if you are a gifted offensive player, someone skilled in shooting and in putting the puck in the net, one who has always been one of the best at scoring goals? Your instinct is always to push forward, to go for a goal. You think offense first. You’re going to have a problem, because your plan is not the coach’s plan. You won’t be on the same page as him, and there will be conflict.

God has a game plan. It does include the messianic age and all of its blessings, as we just saw, but not yet. What the ancient Jews didn’t understand was that will all happen when the King returns. But they needed to listen to him when he talked about why he came. In Luke 19:10 he said, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Pay attention to what he did not say. He did not say he came to take over the world. He did not say he came to give the Romans what they so richly deserved. He did not say he came to make everybody rich. He did not say he came to make sure Israel was on top.He came to save lost people, including Romans. He came to deal with the biggest issue of their lives, and that was not that they needed better circumstances. It wasn’t even that they be free in this world. He came to fix their biggest problem, and that was that they were alienated from God.

Mark 8:31 says of Jesus, “He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after 3 days rise again.” Nothing in there about power and ruling. We saw in John 10:10 that Jesus said he came that we might have life to the full. That sounds good. But what is that, and how do you get it? We learned when we looked at that passage that it is not something that is a function of circumstances. It is something inside, and you get it from being connected to God and having his life in you. It has nothing to do with what is happening around you.

It is understandable why we all want good circumstances. Life is not fun when it is painful and hard. But we need to grasp that God’s game plan is not to give us a more fun and comfortable life. He’s certainly not against us having that. But it is not what he is seeking to bring about. Romans 8:28, that awesome verse, says, “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” That doesn’t mean everything that happens will be good, but that God will work for good in everything that happens when we are called to his purpose. Ah, his purpose. That’s about his game plan. What is that purpose? The next verse tells us. “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.” That’s God’s game plan. He is working to make us like Jesus.

Why does he want that? There are a couple of reasons. One of them is easier to understand than the other. The easy one is that Jesus came to bring us fullness of life. That’s the plan. The way we get that life is by becoming like Jesus. The more we’re like Jesus, the more we will experience fullness of life. That fullness of life has nothing to do with good circumstances. You have to ask, how were Jesus’ circumstances? Well they don’t appear to have been all that appealing. He grew up in a family that had no power or influence, a blue collar family. They were part of an oppressed people. Life was hard. Then he began his ministry and he faced lots of misunderstanding and opposition. Even his own family thought he had gone off the rails. Then he was rejected by the people he came to save and put on a cross. Yet despite all that he had the life that we want, because it was inside him. So we start with understanding that God’s plan isn’t to make our lives a good imitation of Disneyland, the happiest place on earth, but to make us a good imitations of Jesus, the holiest, most alive, most joyful people on earth.

There is another aspect to God’s plan that is difficult to understand because it is above our pay grade. In Ephesians 3:10-11 Paul said that God’s “intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus.” There’s a lot packed into those verses, but note this is about God’s eternal purpose, his plan. It has to do with demonstrating his wisdom to beings in the spiritual realm!

When our kids were young there were lots of kids their age in our neighborhood and they played lots of games in the street in front of our house. One common characteristic of those contests was a lot of arguing. Often there was more arguing than playing. They argued so much because those games were so crucial. They weren’t life and death, they were much more important than that. The only thing that usually kept them from being total argue fests was if an adult was present. Those kids were only vaguely aware that there was a whole world out there where those games had zero significance, and that they were eventually headed for that world. If you wish you can ask them today how important those games are to them. They’ll just laugh. They hardly remember them.

There is another world that we are only vaguely aware of at most. It is that spiritual realm where a cosmic battle is going on. We get only brief glimpses of it in the Bible. It’s just enough to let us know that realm is real and that God is actually doing something that involves us in that realm. Somehow he wants to use us in that cosmic contest. He is working his plan and purpose in our lives to make us like Jesus because it has a big role to play in that spiritual realm. We see that in the book of Job, where his response to the tragedies that befall him are actually playing a role in that spiritual realm. So it is helpful for us to remember that all the things that we get so focused on in this world are part of the kids’ games. They are not what it’s all about.

It is crucial that we line up with God’s plan. We need to trust in his wisdom, love, power and goodness. We need to follow his plan and not our own. His plan is life. It is cosmically significant, while ours is playing kids games that are devoid of real meaning.

GOD USES THE DONKEY PLAN

It turns out that the donkey in this story sends a message. We get that by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey Jesus was fulfilling a prophecy. But why did God have Zechariah give that prophecy in the first place? Why did he make a thing about Messiah riding in on a donkey? If Jesus was making a claim to be the King of Israel, shouldn’t he have had something more regal than a donkey to ride on? The Romans would have had their ruler riding either on a chariot or on a magnificent horse. So would most other powerful nations. When the President of the United States goes in a motorcade or a parade, does he ride in a ten year old Chevy Malibu? No way. He is in a limousine, something befitting his status. Jesus riding on a donkey was kind of like the old Malibu. It was serviceable transportation, but that’s all.

This was not a case of the rental agency being all out of horses. Hey, it’s the feast. There’s lots of people in town and we’ve rented all the horses. All we have is a donkey. You can have that, or if you can wait until after the Passover; we’ll have lots of horses available then. This was purposeful. Riding a regal, powerful horse was about power and status. Riding a donkey was about humility and service. And that’s what Jesus was all about. He came to serve, not to be served.

In Zechariah’s prophecy he said Messiah would come “lowly” or humble, riding on a donkey. That was the point. In Matthew 11:29 Jesus said of himself, “I am gentle and humble in heart.” Jesus wasn’t coming to exert power and control. He was coming to serve, to give himself up for us, Jesus didn’t come with a love of power, a desire to conquer and dominate and control. He came with the power of love, the willingness to sacrifice to seek the good of others.

In his book, *The Parables Of The Kingdom*, Robert Capon wrote, “Direct, straight line, intervening power does…have many uses…Indeed, straight line power (‘use the force you need to get what you want) is responsible for almost everything that happens in the world…Unfortunately it has a whopping limitation. If one of the chief objects in life is to remain in loving relationships with other people, straight line power becomes useless…You can snatch your baby boy away from the edge of a cliff and not have a broken relationship on your hands. But just try interfering with his plans when he is 20 and see what happens…The whole thing will be destroyed unless you, who on any reasonable view should be allowed to use straight line power, simply refuse to use it.”

The power of humility and love, the power of the donkey, looks for all the world like a lack of power. It is Jesus, with unimaginable power, allowing himself to be mocked, ridiculed, tortured and put on a cross. The donkey plan looks like having no power. It looks like losing. But in truth it is real power. In his book, *The Signature Of Jesus*, Brennan Manning wrote, “Power affects behavior, love affects the heart.”

Jesus came not to control people, but to change their hearts to transform them. The only way he could do that is by using what Martin Luther called left handed power. It is the power of humility and love, of giving oneself up, of serving rather than winning and controlling.

Jesus called on us to follow his example, to live with left handed power. Philippians 2:5 says, “Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.” Verses 7-8 say Jesus, “Made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.”

This is the power we are to wield in our relationships. The donkey power is the power of loving, serving, humbling ourselves, giving ourselves up to seek the good of others. Many years ago I experienced an example of the power of love. My son, Toby, went through a few years in his adolescence where he was at times difficult. One day he was butting heads with me in the kitchen. I was trying to get him to understand why we wanted him to do some things he was refusing to do. I was getting increasingly frustrated because I wanted his best, and he seemed determined to not have it. I was getting nowhere. We had several difficult conversations like that around that time. On that occasion I suddenly just felt overwhelmed. I was trying everything I could think of to get through to him and to get him to cooperate, and nothing was working. It all hit me hard. I felt like I was failing as a dad. I wasn’t getting the job done and I feared what it would mean for my son. I didn’t know what to do. I tried to speak, but got choked up. Tears welled up in my eyes. Toby saw this and asked what was wrong, but I couldn’t even answer him. I was stunned at what happened next. His attitude completely changed. He apologized for how he had been behaving. What happened was he saw how much I loved him. In that moment I had given up trying to use power to get him to do what I wanted, and just loved him, and that changed everything. Instead of being combatants, we became teammates, working together.

When we apply the donkey idea to our relationships with spouses, kids, friends, neighbors, classmates, even people we encounter in the world, that’s when we are going to have power not to enforce our will, not to control people and circumstances and make life go the way we want, get people to do what we want them to, but to affect people’s hearts. That’s what it means to be like Jesus. That’s when we play the role in the cosmic battle God wants us to play, and it is when we will find real life.