

## **John: Little Donkey**

**John 12:12-50**

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We continue our studies in John's gospel and we come now to chapter 12 and I'm going to read from verse 12 to verse 36.

On the next day the large crowd who had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took the branches of the palm trees and went out to meet Him, and began to shout, "Hosanna! BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD, even the King of Israel." Jesus, finding a young donkey, sat on it; as it is written, "FEAR NOT, DAUGHTER OF ZION; BEHOLD, YOUR KING IS COMING, SEATED ON A DONKEY'S COLT." These things His disciples did not understand at the first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written of Him, and that they had done these things to Him. So the people, who were with Him when He called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead, continued to testify about Him. For this reason also the people went and met Him, because they heard that He had performed this sign. So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are not doing any good; look, the world has gone after Him." Now there were some Greeks among those who were going up to worship at the feast; these then came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and began to ask him, saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip came and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip came and told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. "If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him. "Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour.

"Father, glorify Your name." Then a voice came out of heaven: "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again." So the crowd of people who stood

by and heard it were saying that it had thundered; others were saying, "An angel has spoken to Him." Jesus answered and said, "This voice has not come for My sake, but for your sakes. " Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die. The crowd then answered Him, "We have heard out of the Law that the Christ is to remain forever; and how can You say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this Son of Man?" So Jesus said to them, "For a little while longer the Light is among you. Walk while you have the Light, so that darkness will not overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes. "While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light." These things Jesus spoke, and He went away and hid Himself from them."

Amen. May God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word. Let's pray.

*Our Father in heaven, as we come tonight to a passage of some solemnity, we do pray for the blessing of Your Spirit. Holy Spirit, make this truth come to life and to light in our hearts, for Jesus' sake, Amen.*

Yesterday was the Ides of March, the 15th of March. The day on which Julius Caesar was murdered on the steps of the Senate in Rome. He was born with an unbridled ambition, and an unsurpassed skill in oratory. He had managed to manipulate his way to the position of the consul of Rome by 59 BC, and after his year of service, he was sent to Gaul, France. From here, he managed to conquer not only the Germanic tribes, but also my own ancestors, the Celts. His popularity grew, to such an extent that the Senate and especially, Pompey, were deeply alarmed and they issued him an edict: that he should disband his army, lest he become an enemy of the state. In January of 49 BC, Caesar was staying in the northern Italian city of Ravenna. He had a decision to make. Either he acquiesced to the Senate's commands, or else he moved southward, towards Rome, and to confront Pompey, and to start an inevitable civil war. There was a law, that no general should cross the river Rubicon, and no general should ever bring his army into the city of Rome, and into Italy proper. It was said that he wavered a little when he came to the Rubicon River, and then, all of a sudden, drawing his sword, marched into the Rubicon River and cried, "*Alea jacta est,*" the die is cast. And marched into the city of Rome. And, of course, defeated it and became its dictator. Five years later, he was dead. Jesus is doing something very similar here. Because here, in going into Jerusalem, the die was being firmly cast. There would be no turning back.. It was a point of no retreat. Time for Him had no run out. The inevitable battle was about to begin. This passage, and I'm largely focusing on verses 12-36 that we read together, contains a beautiful text. It comes from certain Greeks. We're not sure exactly who they were. And they ask Philip, who in turn asks Andrew, who in turn goes to Jesus and the question is this: "Sir, we would see Jesus." It's written on many a pulpit. It's written on the

pulpit of Reformed Theological Seminary. Sir, we would see Jesus.

Today, I want us to see Jesus. I want us to see Him in three different ways. I want us to see Him, first of all, tenacious. I want to see Him, secondly, troubled. I want to see Him, thirdly, triumphant.

### **I. Jesus tenacious.**

I want to see Him, first of all, tenacious. By that I mean resolute. By that I mean not willing to let go, determined. Take what He says in verse 23, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." The hour has come. The crossing of the Rubicon, you understand. So far in John's gospel, in 8:20, for example, we've read statements like, "The hour has not yet come." There were certain things that He was not yet prepared to do because His hour had not yet come, but now the hour has come. There is a sense in which only now the real glory of the Son of Man is going to be displayed.

So far, in the miracles that we've seen in John's gospels, the miracles and the signs and the wonders, they've been only a prelude. There's something now. Did you notice in verse 31 the repetition of the word *now*? Now, judgment is upon this world. Now, the ruler of this world shall be cast out. Many of you heard the President's words this afternoon, I'm sure, that time was running out, that there was something determinative about the next 24 hours. For the world, I think he said. And Jesus is saying, "There is something determinative happening right now, as I enter Jerusalem, as I come into this city, there is something going to happen that is going to change, yes, the whole world. It was for this event that He had come. That's why it's not the incarnation that's the pivotal point of Jesus' life and ministry. It is the cross. It is the cross and the events that followed. The burial, and resurrection, and ascension, and session at God's right hand. There is something about those events for which He had come. Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains alone, Jesus says, but if it dies it produces much fruit."

And now, the Son of Man is going to be glorified. Now, much fruit is going to be born as a consequence of what I do now. Let me change the figure as Jesus Himself does here. He says, in verse 32, "When I am lifted up," from the earth, and He's used those words before. Back in chapter 3, in His discourse with Nicodemus, you remember, He had reminded them that "Just as the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up." He's referring to the cross, He's referring to more than the cross, He's referring to the resurrection and the ascension, but He's referring to those events that will begin with Him being lifted up onto the cross.

The point is that these events must now occur. And He's resolute about it. He's determined about it. He won't let it go now. He's come to fulfill His role as the

servant of the Lord. By entering Jerusalem He begins a series of events that have determined, planned from the very beginning. It was this very hour, He says in verse 27, "It was for this very hour that I have come." Eternal destinies are being worked out now. Jesus had come to die. He'd come to cast out Satan. He had come to draw sinners to Himself. "Lifted up was He to die, it is finished was His cry. Now in heaven exalted high, hallelujah what a Savior." Tenacious, determined, resolute.

## **II. Secondly, I want us to see Him troubled.**

He says, in verse 27, "Now My heart is troubled." What an amazing statement to come from the lips of Jesus Christ. What an amazing statement to come from the lips of the Son of God, that He is troubled. Just in two chapter's time, John 14:1-2, "Let not your heart be troubled," He said, "Believe in God believe also in Me. In My Father's house there are many mansions. If it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you I will come again and receive you unto Myself that where I am there you may be also. Let not your hearts be troubled." And yet, here it is. Jesus is troubled. His heart is troubled. It's hard to reconcile it, isn't' it. It is hard to reconcile those two things.

Let me say, first of all, that what we see here is an insight into the human soul, the human psyche, of Jesus. Jesus has a soul. A reasonable soul, as the *The Shorter Catechism* defines it. In the 17th Century, when *The Shorter Catechism* was written, soul and mind and psyche, if not synonymous, were certainly related. He's troubled, in His soul, in His psyche, in His innermost being, in the core of His personality as the incarnate Lord. He's troubled.

One of the tragic figures of the early Church was a man by the name of Apollinarius. Apollinarius was a stout defender of the deity of Christ, but in defending the deity of Christ, he managed at the same time to deny that Jesus had a human soul, a human psyche, a human mind. The body was inhabited by the eternal Word, but Jesus did not have a human psychology. The Church, at Constantinople, in 381 AD condemned it as a heresy. If Christ did not identify with man as man, not just with our bodily nature, but with our psychological nature, if God doesn't identify with us as we are, as we have been made, then we cannot be saved. That was the argument.

Isn't it interesting, now, it's more than interesting, it's wonderful, in the true sense of that word, to find in the gospels that Jesus experiences the full range of human emotions. He is "the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief," Isaiah prophesied. You never read of Jesus laughing, that's not to say that Jesus never laughed, but He was more and more displaying, I think, the darker side of human emotions because His mission as the Son of Man, as the sin bearer, as the substitute, as the one who came to die, lay heavily upon Him. And it was no laughing matter. The Greek here reads, *shaken, agitated*. I find that of immense

help, don't you, that Jesus, the Son of God, the one who sits at God's right hand in glory, the one of whom we are thinking this morning, who rose again from the dead and is now sitting at the right hand of God, that Jesus was "tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin." How does the hymn writer put it, "We've been through no darker rooms than He went through before." The events before Him as they unfolded now, perhaps they lay clearer on His mind than they had ever done before, and they shook Him to the core. His heart is troubled by it. You can see here something of a foretaste of Gethsemane, can't you. In the Garden of Gethsemane, when He cries out, in the travail of His soul, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me." Now, I know He goes on to say, "Not My will but Thy will," but there was a struggle, and He came to that resolution through the struggle. There's even an angel, there's even a voice, at least, that speaks from heaven as it did in the Garden of Gethsemane, strengthening Him.

Let me try to speak to this tension for a moment, the tension between what is said here about Jesus being troubled, and what He will go on to say in John 14, in the Upper Room, "Let not your hearts be troubled." And I think there's a difference between the trouble of unbelief, which is John 14, and the trouble that comes from uncertainty, about the way forward. Jesus is struggling with what God's will is, as it dawns upon Him, and becomes more and more clear what the way forward for the Son of Man is going to cost Him. As He now sees with a clear vision that He is going to die in Jerusalem, He is troubled by it. Not for a moment did He sin. Not for a moment did He flinch. Not for a moment did He deny His resolve to be the Son of Man who must suffer on behalf of sinners, but He's still troubled by it.

There is a natural fear of pain and death, but it's more than that here, of course. Jesus is contemplating what it means to be abandoned by His Father in heaven, what it means for the Son of Man to identify with sinners, the holy God to be made sin for us, and what that means, the revulsion of it. As He thinks about what it will mean when the unmitigated wrath of God is poured upon Him, and He's troubled by it. The impending wrath, the darkness, a road down which He'd never been before. Look at verse 27. "What shall I say," He says, "Now My soul has become troubled." Shall I say this, or shall I say that? Now, the answer becomes clear as soon as He says it.

Isn't it interesting that He should utter those words, "What shall I say?" I don't want to sentimentalize this passage. But I think we can ask this question. Pause here for a minute and ask, have you never been there, when the unfolding providence of God seems so dark, and so horrible, and so frightful, and not so much what you know, but what you don't know, what you've never experienced, what you've never gone through, and your soul is troubled and you're saying words like Jesus is saying here, "What am I going to say? What am I going to do?" Have you never been there? Have you ever sat in that chair? What lay before Him stripped Him bare. He's troubled by it. The Son of God, the Lord of Glory, and His heart is troubled, shaken, for you and me.

There's the beginnings of the love of Jesus for you and me. There's the beginnings of what it cost Him, that He was prepared to enter that darkness, that uncertainty, that unknown, for you and me. Do you know this hymn? "Where high the heavenly temple stands, the house of God not made with hands? The great high priest our nature wears, the guardian of mankind appears. He who for me their surety stood, and poured on earth His precious blood, pursued in heaven His mighty plan, the Savior and the friend of man. Though now ascended up on high, He bends on earth a brother's eye, partaking of the human name, He knows the frailty of our frame. Our fellow suffered yet retains, a fellow feeling of our pains, and still remembers in the skies, His tears, His agonies, and cries. In every pang that rends the heart, the Man of Sorrows has a part. He sympathizes with our grief, and to the suffered sends relief. With boldness therefore at the throne, let us make our sorrows known, and ask the aid of heavenly power, to help us in the evil hour." He's troubled.

### **III. Jesus triumphant.**

But thirdly, I want us to see Jesus in another perspective. Not only tenacious, determined, troubled, agitated, but triumphant. Because that's what the entry into Jerusalem is all about, this riding on a donkey into the city of Jerusalem. Pilgrims who normally came for the feast, the Passover, would normally walk the last few miles into the city, singing the Ascent Psalms. He was fulfilling, of course, a prophecy of Zechariah, "Rejoice, rejoice greatly O daughter of Jerusalem." And the pilgrims got the message. They took palm branches and placed them in the street before Him, and they cried out, little children cried out, "Hosanna, hosanna, to the Son of David."

You know what the word *hosanna* means. You know where it comes from. Actually, if you go back to the Greek New Testament, it's the same word. The New Testament translators didn't know what to do with it, so they just transliterated it. It's the same word. But actually, the Greeks didn't know what to do with it either, because it comes from the Hebrew, and all they did was transliterate the Hebrew. It occurs in only one place, in Psalm 118, and in Psalm 118:25, it means, save. It's a cry for help. Now something happened to the word as the centuries went by, so that by the first century, it actually had a different meaning. It wasn't so much a cry for help, but they took the meaning from the second part of that verse, which says, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." And the word *hosanna* meant *salvation*. Salvation has come. What they saw, when Jesus rode on this donkey, was a triumphant Savior, the deliverer of Jerusalem. How would you expect Jesus to ride into Jerusalem? On Shadowfax? On a white charger? That would be suitable, wouldn't it. That beautiful white horse in the movie, the best part of the movie, that moment when Gandalf whistles and the horse comes all the way up in one long, panoramic scene and stops right before him. It's the most beautiful part of the movie. Wouldn't that be

suitable? For Jesus to come riding into Jerusalem on a white charger? But no, on a donkey. There's something almost ridiculous about it, isn't there. I don't mean to demean donkeys, but there's something ridiculous about it, because the Son of Man isn't coming as a political savior of Jerusalem, He's coming as the divine Messiah, He's coming as the seed that must be cast to the ground and die, He's coming as the sin bearer, He's coming as the servant of the Lord who must be obedient to the will of God, even to the point of death. "If I be lifted up," He says, "I will draw all men to Myself." That's the measure of His triumph, that as a consequence of His being lifted up, being crucified, and buried and resurrected, and ascended to the right hand of God, He will draw sinners to Himself. That's the measure of His triumph. "But lo there breaks, a yet more glorious day, the saints triumphant rise in bright array. The King of Glory passes on His way. Alleluia, alleluia. From earth's wide bounds, and ocean's farthest coast, through gates of ....., stream in the countless host, singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost, alleluia, alleluia."

Can you see it? And those people in Jerusalem, some of them at least, saw that this was the prelude, this was the portent of that great day of glorious triumph and exaltation. And just a generation from this time, just over a generation, Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasianus, Emperor Titus, would march four legions to surround Jerusalem. In AD 70 he would begin an attack upon the city. Within a month the walls of the city would collapse. Within days after that, the city was destroyed. The temple was decimated. Many were killed and slaughtered. He took thousands of Jews as slaves and marched them into the city of Rome itself, bearing aloft the very holy utensils of the temple and so much gold that Josephus the historian says "that the price of gold halved as consequence." Tens of thousands of people came out to see, and you can go to Rome this day and see the Arch of Titus depicting that event. You can drive through it.

But Jesus' triumph is of a different sort, and what John now does at the end of this chapter is say, it calls for one of two choices. It calls either faith or rejection. That's the issue. Do you believe or do you not? And there are consequences for both. Look at verse 26, "If anyone serves Me let him follow Me, and where I am there shall My servant also be. If anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him." That's John's call to you tonight, to follow and serve and bow the knee and acknowledge this Jesus as the Son of God, glorious and triumphant, and ruling and reigning at His right hand. Let's pray together.

*Our Father in heaven, we thank You for Your word, for this beautiful passage. We too, this night, would see Jesus. We pray for every single individual in this sanctuary this evening, that You would work a work of faith in each one's heart. For Jesus' sake, draw them to Yourself, by the power of Your Spirit, we pray and exalt and glorify Your name as a consequence, we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.*

A Guide to the Evening Service

## Thoughts on Worship

What is worship? Well, the Psalmist tells us succinctly. It is giving unto the Lord the glory due His name (Psalm 29:1-2). Where do we find the substance of and our direction for our worship? The Bible. Thus, at First Presbyterian Church, our motto for worship is: “Sing the Bible, Pray the Bible, Read the Bible, Preach the Bible.” So we strive to be sure that all that we sing is scriptural, that our prayers are saturated with Scripture, that much of the word of God is read in each public service, and that the preaching here is based on the Bible.

## The Themes of the Service

Tonight's passage in the Gospel of John brings us back to Jerusalem and the beginning of the section that will lead up to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. We are only half way through the Gospel of John, but the rest of the book will deal with these last few days. The first half has covered almost three years, but the second half covers one week! That in itself tells us that this is no ordinary biography of Jesus. There is something about this final week that is hugely important.

## The Psalm, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs

### ***Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise***

It is often difficult to know why a certain hymn becomes popular. Is it the fact that words speak directly to us in some way, or is it that a really memorable tune is “married” to the hymn that is immediately recognizable? Both the hymn and the tune of “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise” are among the most well known in Christendom! The hymn's author probably did not intend the hymn for congregational singing. As a Free Church minister (and at one time, its Moderator), William Chalmers Smith would have been committed to unaccompanied exclusive psalmody! His poetry now appears in the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, and this particular hymn extols the wisdom of God. Since our theme this evening is God's providence, the idea of wisdom plays an essential component. Everything – yes! Everything – that God does is ordered with the oversight of infinite wisdom. Not a detail of it is out of place. God is wise. He established the world “by His wisdom” (Jer. 51:15). How do we know that everything God does is wise? Because of Jesus Christ – He is the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24).

### **O Day of Rest and Gladness (RUF Tune)**

This is a song of thanksgiving to God for the blessings of His special day: the Lord's Day, the Christian Sabbath. Wordsworth's lyrics personify the Sabbath and address it directly in the first three stanzas. The second stanza ties in to the resurrection theme of this morning's hymns.



## **This Is the Day the Lord Has Made (Psalm 118)**

This Isaac Watts' paraphrase of Psalm 118 is put to the bouncy and singable tune "Arlington" – a melody familiar to our congregation. We sing the first stanza tonight, before the Children's Devotional.

All Glory, Laud, and Honor

The section of Scripture in John's Gospel that we consider this evening begins with an account of "Triumphal Entry" of Jesus into Jerusalem. This hymn, written by Theodulph of Orleans, is over 1,200 years old! It was written in prison in Angiers where Theodulph was taken and in which he died. It speaks of the ride Jesus took on a "donkey" into the City of Jerusalem, knowing that His life was forfeited.

The Sermon

"Little Donkey." Jesus asks that something strange occur as He makes His way into the City of Jerusalem (for what will be the last time). He entered on a donkey, to the adulation of the crowds who waved palm branches in His honor. In the middle of this story is a cameo of Philip (the bean counter! Remember, it was Philip who calculated how much it would cost to feed the 5,000!). This time, he seems unsure what to do when "certain Greeks" say to him, "Sir, we would see Jesus!" This statement has been placed on many a pulpit (including the one at RTS!). Pulpits ought to be places where Jesus is "seen." And preachers need constantly reminding that it Jesus and not themselves that folks want to hear about. Philip had no protocols as to what to do when Greeks came looking for Jesus, hence the somewhat formal way he tells the other disciples in verse 22 about them. "There are some Greeks out here looking for Jesus! What am I supposed to do with them?" he seems to be saying. And what did Jesus do? Preached the gospel to them (12:23-26). And invited them to become His disciples! "If anyone serves me, let him follow me." It is what Jesus always says to those who inquire after Him.

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