

# The Lord Needs It

A sermon in the 2022 sermon series “Reading Between the Lines”

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April 10, 2022—Palm Sunday

**Luke 19:28-38 NRSV** <sup>28</sup>...[Jesus] went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

<sup>29</sup>When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, <sup>30</sup>saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. <sup>31</sup>If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” <sup>32</sup>So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. <sup>33</sup>As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” <sup>34</sup>They said, “The Lord needs it.” <sup>35</sup>Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. <sup>36</sup>As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. <sup>37</sup>As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, <sup>38</sup>saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

Palm Sunday. This is a story we know so well. The donkey. The palm branches. The excited crowd accompanying Jesus. Shouts of “Hosanna!” Jesus entering Jerusalem and the Jewish Temple.

This is a story that appears in all four gospels. The reason the Christian scriptures include multiple gospels is because they aren’t exactly alike. They remember certain events slightly differently. For instance, when Jesus rode down the Mount of Olives and up into Jerusalem, he did so not on a mighty stallion but on a humble colt. That was a deliberate act to signal that he was not a mighty warrior intent on conquering the city but a humble leader intent on bringing peace to a troubled world. But what, exactly, was Jesus riding? One gospel says it was a *donkey*. Two other gospels say it was a *young colt* but don’t specify if it was the foal of a horse or donkey. And there’s one gospel that says Jesus used *two* animals: a foal *and* its mother.

There are other differences in the various gospel accounts. Matthew, Mark and Luke say that a crowd of disciples and followers *accompanied* Jesus, but John’s gospel says that the crowd *came out from Jerusalem* to meet him because they wanted to meet the man who had raised Lazarus from the dead.

John’s gospel is also the only gospel that mentions the crowd waving *palm* branches. Matthew and Mark say they waved “leafy branches” but they don’t specify that they were palm fronds. Since the crowd was on the Mount of Olives, they probably took branches from the olive trees in orchards covering the hillside. And today’s reading from Luke’s gospel has no mention of branches at all – imagine that: a Palm Sunday story with no branches being waved!

Like Matthew and Mark, Luke does say that the crowd used their cloaks to carpet the path ahead of Jesus with their cloaks. That honorific gesture recalled an Old

Testament story about how people greeted the newly anointed King Jehu.<sup>1</sup> But the impromptu red-carpet treatment isn't mentioned in John's gospel.

All of the gospel writers say that the crowd shouted a well-known blessing which Jewish priests traditionally bestowed upon pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for religious festivals: it was a verse from Psalm 118:26 that says, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"<sup>2</sup> But Luke doesn't mention the crowd calling out the plea for God's intervention that we usually associate with Palm Sunday: the Hebrew expression "*Hosanna!*" (which means, "Save, O Lord!"). *Hosanna* is voiced in Matthew, Mark and John, but not Luke.

All this is to say that as well as we know this episode, the reality is that in our minds we have mixed together details from the four gospels to come up with a homogenized version of the Palm Sunday story.

But I want us to return to the part of the story where Jesus told two disciples to run ahead to the village they were approaching. There they would find a colt tied to some sort of hitching post. They were to untie it and bring it to him. Some wonder if Jesus had prearranged this rent-a-colt on a previous trip to Bethany. Most believe that this was an example of Jesus displaying prophetic insight, knowing what would come to pass.

Before the disciples could even respond, Jesus addressed their concern that would have occurred to you and me, too, if we were in their place: *What if someone stops us and asks what we're doing with the colt?* Jesus told them simply to say, "The Lord needs it."

As it happened, that's the question they were asked: "*What do you think you're doing?*" And that's the response they gave: "*The Lord needs it.*"

"The Lord needs it." A simple statement. On this Palm Sunday I suggest that it is this assertion that echoes in our ears. This claim rises above the din of daily life and speaks to us as it never has before. For just like those foal-fetching disciples, as followers of Jesus we are subject to that claim, too. Our loyalty? The Lord needs it. Our devotion? The Lord needs it. Our trust? The Lord needs it. Our obedience? Our confidence and hope and commitment? The Lord needs it.

Realize this, though: the Lord needs our commitment, but not because *his* success depends on it. Jesus calls for us to follow him and serve him for *our* sake. Out of love for us, our Lord and Master needs us, wants us, longs for us to surrender to him. Our strength for facing the challenges of life comes from staying close to him, from imitating him, from acting on his behalf in our everyday encounters with clients and strangers, with neighbors and acquaintance, with friends and with our families.

Our assurance, our comfort, our courage to press on are God's gift as we strive to be fully devoted to Jesus the Son of God. Our grace to find the strength to forgive, our inspiration to delight in praising our Heavenly Father is a gift that comes from loving Jesus, embracing and following and serving him.

Our faithful commitment? The Lord needs it. By God's grace, let us offer our lives to serving the world in the manner of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. 2 Kings 9:13

<sup>2</sup> G.B. Caird, *St. Luke*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963, 216.