

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” ⁴ This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet:

⁵ “Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹⁰ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” ¹¹ The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Two weeks ago, we learned about the “Easter Eggs” in John 4 – the hidden messages within a very familiar story. Last week, we learned about the cathartic moments – the healthy release of emotions - in the familiar story of John 11. Today, Matthew will bring Easter Eggs and big emotions together in a text that is very familiar to many of you.

It's Palm Sunday. The beginning of Holy Week, and we know this story. There are palm branches and shouts of Hosanna. There are cloaks on the back of a donkey and on a . . . wait . . . I thought it was just one donkey. What's with the colt?

I loved the look on the faces of the three grandmothers who shared with the group on Wednesday at Bible study that they had never noticed that there were two animals in Matthew's Palm Sunday story until they read the story this week. I love when life-long church go-ers tell me that they've learned something new. Something that they had never heard before. That makes me inexplicably happy. And so, I imagine that many more of you are in that same position. You may be celebrating your 67th Palm Sunday and have only just heard this detail for the first time. You may be thinking to yourself, why did I think it was just one donkey?

Well, because 75% of the gospel stories about Palm Sunday have Jesus riding in on one donkey – a young colt in fact. One that had never been ridden before it says. Mark, Luke, and John all tell the story this way, with one donkey. So, you're not crazy. You're remembering what you've heard, from scripture no less.

That's what really gets me about people who swear that the Bible is infallible and inerrant. That it never contradicts itself. Because, if you read it, you find several examples of conflicting accounts. Creation, Noah's flood, the chronology of Jesus' teachings - there are different versions of each of these stories within our scripture.

But back to the donkey dilemma. In Matthew's version, why does Jesus ask for two donkeys? Why does it say cloaks were placed on both, and that he sat on both? Did he sit on the donkey and rest his feet on the colt like a royal footstool? Did he ride one for half a mile and then switch so as not to burden one more than the other? Did he lovingly want to keep mama donkey and baby donkey together? My sister McKensey is a professional horsewoman, and she can literally ride on two horses at the same time, standing with one foot on each horse as they canter side by side, but I somehow don't think that's what Jesus was doing.

It's intriguing for our brains to wander and wonder how to make sense of this, but believe it or not, the logistics of the way he rode two donkeys is not the point.

The point is symbolic. The reference to two donkeys is an Easter Egg.

I think I've told you at some point before that each Gospel was written by a unique author for a unique audience. Do you remember that? Well, as a reminder, there were twelve male disciples. One betrays him, one doubts him, four of them get book deals. (Just kidding, Luke wasn't a disciple. He came along later.) But they do all have different perspectives. Mark is writing Peter's version of events, a condensed and hasty version that points to Jesus as the harbinger of the upside-down kingdom of God. Luke is a gentile writing to a Gentile audience about the all-inclusive love of a God who used to be associated with the Jewish people alone. John was a poet writing theologically about Jesus being God Incarnate. And that leaves us with Matthew. Matthew was a Jewish man, writing for a Jewish audience, who knew the Jewish scriptures, and incorporated them into his story to prove Jesus is the long-sought after Jewish Messiah.

So, throughout Matthew's gospel, from beginning to end, there are Easter Eggs that only the Jewish people and modern Christian Bible scholars can understand. But the good news is, you all are excellent Bible scholars, so let's crack these Easter Eggs, shall we?

There are not one, not two, but three scriptural references in Matthew's telling of the entrance into Jerusalem that are of note.

The first is Psalm 118. We've already spent time in the psalms during Lent, and we've come to realize that psalms are incorporated into other passages sometimes even without reference. In Matthew's telling of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, the people are quoting Psalm 118. Psalm 118 is a song many believe to have been written by King David. It is about returning to Jerusalem after a victory.

In it, the people repeat over and over, "God's steadfast love endures forever!" And they say, "It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in mortals and earthly princes." And they say, "Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!" and they say, "Blessed is the

one who comes in the name of the Lord. Bind the festal procession with branches, all the way to the alter.”

Matthew doesn't say, the people recited Psalm 118, but his readers understood the reference. They knew what those lines meant. And they knew that hosanna to the Son of David meant, Save us, Messiah!” because hosanna means save us, and son of David means Messiah.

Psalm 118 is an Easter Egg in Matthew's story.

But the really interesting Easter Egg is not about the psalm, it's about the donkey and her colt. Mark, Luke, and John have Jesus asking for and riding on a young colt that has never been ridden before. A single, small donkey. Matthew has two, and in case we think there's some unintentional mistake here, Matthew emphasizes the two by referencing them, distinctly, three times in seven verses - a donkey and her colt - that are to be a part of the procession. Why?

Well, who remembers what is said in Genesis 49 and Zechariah 9. Do you? No worries. I have them here.

In Genesis 49, we hear Israel's final words to his twelve sons. He is elderly and wants to speak to them before he departs. To his eldest son he says, “Reuben, you are my firstborn, excelling in rank and excelling in power. Unstable as water, you shall no longer excel . . .”

Yikes, those are harsh words from Dad. Then he says, “Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce . . .”

He says they shall suffer.

But then he gets to Judah. He says, “Your brothers shall praise you; your father's sons shall bow down before you. The scepter shall not depart from Judah until the obedience of the peoples is his. Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine and his robe in the blood of grapes.”

Israel tells Judah, who was not originally his favorite son, or even his second favorite son, that his legacy will be royal. One of his descendants will be robed in purple garments, and the people shall obey him, and we have the double entendre of two animals.

Any guess which tribe Jesus descends from ? Yes, that would be Judah.

Then, finally, Zechariah takes up the imagery. Matthew specifically says, Jesus asked for the donkey and the colt to fulfill the prophesy, but he doesn't even reference Zechariah. Good thing the Bible has footnotes!

But you need to hear more than what Matthew quotes here. It was read earlier, but sometime, I realize, you don't understand what connection the first reading in our service has to do with the rest of the story, so let's hear it again. Zechariah 9:9-10 says, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth."

Zechariah is prophesying about a king who breaks the weapons of war, who speaks peace to the nations, whose rule stretches far and wide — not through domination, but through gentleness. A king who rides not above the people, but among them. A king who comes to Jerusalem riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Did Jesus ride on two donkeys – a mama and a little guy? Were Mark, Luke, and John forgetting a detail of a really memorable moment? Probably not.

But let's not call Matthew wrong for writing it this way. Instead, think of Matthew like a composer of a beautiful piece of music. And he's taking four distinct voices, the voice of our ancestor Jacob, – father of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the voice of King David – psalmist and hero of the people, and the voice of Zechariah – a prophet who dreamed of a different kind of king who would bring peace and rule with justice, and finally the voice of Jesus himself, the prophet and miracle worker and descendent of Judah, the one he's lived

with for three years – and in his telling of the story, he’s creating a visionary work that has four-part harmony is tied together by this image of a donkey and the colt of a donkey.

To be honest, the Hebrew scriptures are full of what’s called parallelism – one thought, echoed twice for emphasis and rhythm. It doesn’t literally mean that there were two animals in any of the references Matthew was thinking of, but I understand what he was trying to do. He was trying with all his might to help his audience, his readers, who knew these scriptures, to hear the ancient words of promise and hope. To put the puzzle pieces together so that they might believe, as he did, that the one entering the gates of Jerusalem was the one who everyone had been waiting for for so long.

And I believe him in that regard. Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecies, all the prophets, in every way except one. Jesus never sought an earthly kingdom. Never carried a sword, never accumulated wealth or possessions. He never fought on the battlefield, never wore a robe washed in red wine, never sought a crown, never wore one, except the crown of thorns that would be his in a few days. He was not the Messiah that Matthew or the people expected. He was more. He was better.

So “Hail to the king! Hosanna in the highest heaven! Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord riding on the donkey, the foal of a donkey!” Amen.