

Palm Sunday (Mark 11:1-11)

The two disciples must have imagined a grander and nobler role for themselves than donkey detail. For this they left their fishing nets?

by [Thomas G. Long](#) in the [April 4, 2006](#) issue

As Jesus was about to descend the Mount of Olives to enter Jerusalem, Mark reports, he dispatched two of his disciples to fetch a colt. A seemingly minor matter of transportation it would seem, but surprisingly, over half of Mark's story of Jesus' entry into the city is occupied with mundane details about acquiring this animal—where to go to find it, what kind of colt to seek, what to do, what to say.

Though no one knows what these two disciples were thinking, I am fairly confident that they had imagined for themselves a grander and nobler role on this day than being on donkey detail. Mark does not name these disciples, but maybe they were James and John, who only hours before had proposed to Jesus, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But it hardly matters which two they were. All of the disciples had been jockeying for advantage, angling for glory, arguing about who was the greatest. So it is deliciously ironic that on this very public and glorious day of Jesus' ministry, a day when he will be welcomed into Jerusalem with joyous hosannas, they find themselves engaged in a most unromantic form of ministry, mucking around a stable, looking suspiciously like horse thieves, and trying to wrestle an untamed and no doubt balky animal toward the olive groves. For this they left their fishing nets?

Why does Mark allow this donkey-seeking scene to come across as a trivial matter of advance planning? In the Gospel of John, by contrast, Jesus begins his entry into Jerusalem on foot. The donkey enters the picture only afterward, when the crowd gets caught up in a palm-waving, nationalistic, king-admiring zeal. At that point Jesus finds the donkey on his own and sits on it, as if to say, "I'm not that kind of king." In John, then, acquiring the donkey is something that Jesus himself does as a dramatic gesture, and it is a beautiful symbol of his humility in the face of triumphalist misunderstanding. But in Mark, finding the donkey seems more like a delegated chore—somewhat akin to the worship committee meeting to plan the Palm Sunday service, one of those thousands of routine and inglorious details of church work that are necessary but not the real action.

In the ordination service of my tradition, candidates for the ministry are asked, "Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors and work for the reconciliation of the world? . . . Will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love?" These are bracing words, and the wind ruffles through your hair when you hear them. Such language implies that ministry is a brave white-water romp over the cultural rapids toward global transformation in the name of Christ. Never once is it mentioned that serving people with energy, imagination and love often boils down to stuff like ordering bulletin covers, changing light bulbs in the restrooms, visiting people in nursing homes who aren't quite sure who you are, getting the brakes relined on the church van, making a breathless Saturday afternoon run to the florist because someone forgot to order the palm branches and, as two of Jesus' disciples found out, finding a suitable donkey at the last minute.

It is right at this place, though, that Mark imparts some of his best theological wisdom. He begins his Gospel with the exhilarating trumpet call to "prepare the way of the Lord," but he makes it clear, by his description of the disciples' activity in the rest of his Gospel, that the way to do so is not by becoming a member of the Knights Templar and gallantly defending Christendom, but rather by performing humble and routine tasks. The disciples

in Mark get a boat ready for Jesus, find out how much food is on hand for the multitude, secure the room and prepare the table for the Last Supper and, of course, chase down a donkey that the Lord needs to enter Jerusalem. Whatever they may have heard when Jesus beckoned, “Follow me,” it has led them into a ministry of handling the gritty details of everyday life. Mark understands, as Markan scholar Joel Marcus notes, “the preparation of the Lord’s way in a rather prosaic manner as the arrangements people make for the ministry of Jesus.”

The “arrangements people make for the ministry of Jesus”—one could hardly find a more apt description of what we, as disciples, are called to do. This cuts two ways. On the one hand, we are called to prepare the way for Jesus’ ministry, and it is his ministry, not ours, that ultimately counts. We are but donkey fetchers. On the other hand, because we are—in ways often hidden from our eyes—“preparing the way of the Lord,” the routine, often exhausting, seemingly mundane donkey-fetching details of our service are gathered into the great arc of Jesus’ redemptive work in the world.

In Mark, the Twelve are sent out to proclaim the gospel, cast out demons, heal the sick and exercise authority. But Mark wants us to know that what this looks like is often a matter of speaking a quiet word in a committee meeting, spending time with someone who is incoherent and coming apart at the seams, emptying a bedpan at the hospital and scratching a few desperate, halting words on a legal pad when getting ready for Sunday’s sermon. In Mark’s world, “preparing the way of the Lord” usually looks like standing hip-deep in the mire of some stable trying to corral a donkey for Jesus.