

## **Southport Presbyterian Church**

**Rev. Jim Capps**

**March 15-16, 2008**

### **A Donkey for Jesus**

**Mark 11:1-11**

Good morning. My name is Rueben bar Judah and I have come across time and space to share my story with you here today. It is a great privilege for me to be here with you. I am a very common person about which there is very little that is extraordinary. The greatest thing that ever happened to me involves Jesus the Nazarene. Maybe the same might be true for some of you.

I lived in the small country of Israel in the southern area known as Judah. All of my days were spent in the small village of Bethany which was on the road to Jericho just east of our capital city, Jerusalem.

People often stayed in Bethany when coming to Jerusalem for one of the great holidays of the Jewish year. While it meant walking down the Mount of Olives across the Kidron Brook and up to the gates of the city, we were a convenient and less expensive place to stay. While much closer than you are to your downtown, we were a lot like your area here with places for people to stay and eat just outside of the city. In fact, you might be able to make it to your downtown faster than we could make it to one of the gates of Jerusalem from Bethany. Maybe in your world and culture, we would have called ourselves "Eastport."

Enough of the geography lesson let me get on with my story. For several generations, my family was the proprietor of a nice inn right on the Jericho Road in Bethany. If you were going to Jerusalem from Jericho you couldn't miss it.

While we were far from rich we made a good living not only providing for food and shelter, but also caring for the animals of our guests as well as renting animals where needed. It was my job from my earliest years to feed and clean the area of the inn where we kept the animals. I became very fond of our beasts of burden, the noble donkey. We always had several of them.

I will never forget an afternoon when I was in my early teens; I was there with my father during a busy season when a census was being taken by the Romans for taxation purposes. Everyone had to go to their city of origin to be enrolled. A young couple, having visible difficulty came walking toward us. The young woman, who was very pregnant, could hardly walk. With her arm over the shoulder of her husband, you could see that the strenuous journey from Jericho had taken its toll.

My father, always the compassionate one, stepped out to help them. He took the young woman's other arm and put it over his shoulder, helping her to a place in the shade. After tenderly finding her a place to sit, he sent me to get them something to drink. It was evident that she was not going to be able to go any further. Even though all of our rooms were full, my father insisted that they stay with us that evening so that she could regain her strength.

At dinner, we found that the young couple, about to deliver their first child, was on their way to Bethlehem, the City of David for the census. Always concerned about peoples' needs, my father told them that they must take one of our donkeys, so that the young woman, whose name was Mary, wouldn't have to walk the last day of the journey in her condition. The young man, named Joseph said that he would come back with the donkey as soon as possible and also would work off the cost, fixing and making things since he was a carpenter.

True to his word, Joseph brought the donkey back in a couple of weeks. He told us about the wonderful birth of his son, Jesus. We didn't see the young family for a couple of years until one day

they stopped and stayed over night with us on their way back from Egypt where they had been told to flee in a dream.

It was on that return trip that we met Jesus. He was a genuinely sweet and bright little lad. He really hit it off with Lazarus, our neighbor boy. Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, were over at our place when Mary, Joseph, and Jesus arrived.

It's really special the way life-long relationships begin at the most unexpected times. That certainly was true for Jesus' family and ours as well as Lazarus' family. They would come through each year for the Passover and at least one other time. Jesus could always be found over at Lazarus' home.

I'll never forget the time that Jesus was 12 and able to go to his first Passover as a man. He got along so well with the other families who traveled with them that his parents never worried about his well-being. That year as they stopped off in Bethany ready to make the trip back to Nazareth, Lazarus came up to them asking for Jesus. They looked for him, but he was not to be found. You can imagine their sheer panic as they retraced their steps back into the city to find him, frantically searching for their precocious Son.

A few hours later, they were back with the Lad. He had been in the Temple talking with the priests and scholars. It was that evening that Mary and Joseph told us about the dreams and the angels who had appeared to them before Jesus' special birth. It was a story they shared with only their most trusted friends.

A couple of years later we were saddened to hear of Joseph's untimely death. Each time Jesus and his family came through, it was evident that even tough times were difficult; Jesus had done a really good job of caring for his mother and siblings. We always looked forward to those visits. Jesus had also become very close to Lazarus and his sisters. They were almost like an extended family to him.

While Jesus had become a very good carpenter, it was evident that He would do something else some day. It was so interesting to be with him. He would listen to everyone else before sharing his own ideas. I never met a person who listened more intently than did Jesus. When he talked, more and more we would hold on to each of his words and ideas considering them to be rich morsels of wisdom. I never met a person who was so genuinely humble and yet, so extremely wise.

I'll never forget that when my father died, Jesus was there as soon as possible compassionately sharing our grief and tenderly expressing sympathy. He knew the pain of losing a father and having the responsibility of taking over the family business.

We really weren't surprised when we heard that Jesus had left the carpenter shop and had become a rabbi. While he had not studied under the great teachers of the day, he was such a good communicator. I was amazed to hear that not only was he teaching but he was also preaching with the same kind of prophetic passion that John the Baptist had. Furthermore, the word from up north in Galilee was that Jesus was healing people with all kinds of diseases and infirmities. You can imagine my conversation with him the next time he came to our village.

I was there the evening Jesus with several of his disciples was at the home of Lazarus, teaching in his informal, yet passionate manner, when Martha got upset with Mary for not helping to host their guests. I smiled with amazement as Jesus seemed to stick up for the always inquisitive Mary.

There was another time, when at a fine dinner party, Mary stepped out for a few moments and did something that caused a hushed silence to settle over the conversing guests. Carrying a container of expensive perfume, Mary knelt by Jesus, poured the perfume over his feet and then wiped his feet with her hair.

Not many months after that thought-provoking event, one morning I got the news that Lazarus was very sick. I quickly hurried over to his home only to be greeted at the door with the news that he was not doing well at all. Martha said that she had sent for Jesus, who was on the other side of the

Jordan where John the Baptist had preached and baptized. She knew that Jesus would heal his best friend when he arrived.

Jesus didn't come and Lazarus died. As was customary, Lazarus was quickly bound and placed in the family tomb where his father had been buried.

Four days after his death, Jesus finally arrived to comfort the distraught sisters and mourners who had gathered to pay their respects. Jesus was visibly moved, tears running down his cheeks as he saw the deep pain of his dear friends who were like a family to him.

What came next would always be indelibly etched upon my mind. Jesus led all of us out to Lazarus' tomb. Then he asked them to do the unthinkable- to roll away the stone from the mouth of the cave-like tomb. After a prayer, Jesus shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" At first, I thought his grief had made Jesus mad. Then I could see movement in the shadows. Shuffling along, still bound in the grave wrappings, Lazarus came out into the sunlight of new life.

At first we were incredulous. What we were seeing just wasn't possible. Our disbelief soon turned to overwhelming celebration. If Jesus could raise the dead, nothing was impossible. As you might imagine many of us believed that Jesus was the Messiah as he had claimed.

While many believed in Jesus that day and became his followers, I am sad to say that many of the religious leaders were clearly threatened by Jesus and wanted to get rid of him. They were afraid of having their power and position undermined. His popularity among the people was immense.

Before withdrawing to the desert for a while for safety sake, Jesus made a strange arrangement with me. He said that when he returned for the Passover celebration, he would send a couple of his followers to get a donkey which had not yet been ridden. The password would be. "The Lord needs it and will send it back shortly."

Jesus came riding on my little donkey. In some ways it was an amusing sight as his feet dragged on the ground. Some of his entourage had thrown their cloaks on the little beast as a kind of make-shift saddle. I joined the processional as he started down the hill past the Mount of Olives. People threw their cloaks on the road in front of him, giving him what you would call the "red carpet treatment."

People began to wave palm branches like they did for the return of a conquering king or military leader. Then there were shouts that began quietly and became louder and more unified: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!" By the way, "Hosanna" means "Save us now!"

I followed the processional all the way to the wall of the city. All kinds of memories flooded my mind. I had seen heroes come home with the plunder after the battle and I had seen Roman military parades. Nothing was quite like this. It was evident that he was coming to the city in peace and humility and not military might. His kingdom was different than any other. He was coming in the name of the Lord as the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords and he was riding on my donkey. In a strangely wonderful way, I felt great pride in the fact that it was my animal on which the long-awaited Messiah was riding.

What happened in that Passover week soon became a blur. After the processional, he returned to Bethany with his disciples for the evening. The next day he went back into the city, going straight to the Temple. His first activity further enraged the religious leaders. He overturned the tables and drove out the crooks that were changing money. That was the "last straw." The chief priests and teachers of the law wanted to kill him as soon as possible.

Everyday Jesus taught and verbally sparred with the leaders in the Temple. Each evening he returned to our village. On Thursday, Jesus and his disciples celebrated the Passover meal in an upper room. After the meal they went to the Garden of Gethsemane there on the Mount of Olives. Even though

Jesus had asked his followers to pray with him, the hectic happenings of the week and the wine at dinner made them drowsy.

It was there in the garden that one of his own disciples betrayed him. All but two of them scattered in fearful panic. They tried Jesus on trumped up charges. The next morning they led him out of the city and crucified him on Golgotha, the “place of the skull.” I watched from afar in disbelief as he bled and finally died. He was buried in the borrowed tomb of Joseph of Arimethea. Fearful of someone stealing his body, the stone at the opening of the grave was sealed and armed soldiers were stationed there to guard his lifeless remains.

It was incomprehensible that all of this could have happened so quickly. One moment he was in a parade on my donkey with the people crying, “Hosanna,” the next moment the bruised battered King wearing a crown of thorns was led out of the city to shouts of “Crucify Him!”

All of us who knew and loved him were not only grief-stricken by his death, but we were also fearful for our own lives. It was clear that nothing would keep the crazed leaders from putting out the flames of this kingdom which Jesus had proclaimed and championed.

Can you believe our serendipitous sense of joy when we heard that the grave could not hold Jesus? He rose triumphantly from death to everlasting life. Many of us were with the disciples when he appeared to them. We saw first-hand that Jesus had risen! He had risen indeed!

As I stand here before you today, I marvel at what God allowed me to experience back in those days so many centuries ago. I was there and saw Joseph and Mary before Jesus was born and they used our donkey. I saw and got to know Jesus as a boy, a young man, a great teacher, and finally as my Savior and Lord. I not only gave him my donkey for the procession on that first Palm Sunday, but as an old man I was martyred because of my faith in him. And you know what? If I had it to do all over again, I would do the very same thing!

What have you given to Jesus, the now Risen and Reigning Lord? More than any material possession like a donkey, he wants your life. If you have never done so, he wants you to receive his gift of forgiveness and eternal life. You can do that right here to day on this Palm Sunday.

He wants to be your King, allowing everything to be under his rule in your life. Is he your King?

He wants to be your Lord. How are you serving this One who gave himself for us? Do your calendars and checkbooks declare that Jesus Christ is your Lord? Are you a secret follower, or, do those around you know that he is the Lord of your life?

Praise God for the privilege of being used by God to be a part of the story of His wonderful deeds in the world in which I lived. He wants to use you to do the same thing today, in your world.