

A Different Kind of Lent: Untying

Luke 19:28-40

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Palm Sunday

Only a handful of stories show up in all four Gospels, and this is one of them. Even still, though, there are differences. Mark's account is the most complete, in a sense. It includes everything we expect to hear about on Palm Sunday: the disciples "borrowing" a colt from another village, because "the Lord needs it." Cloaks thrown on top of the colt, and Jesus riding atop it. More cloaks on the ground, along with big leafy branches cut down from the fields. A crowd shouting Hosanna, and finally, an entry into Jerusalem.

Matthew tells the story much the same way, except he doubles down on the animals. The way Matthew tells it, Jesus tells the disciples to retrieve both a colt and a donkey. This detail is almost certainly added to fulfill words from the prophet Zechariah: *Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.* And so Matthew tells the story that way, going so far as to specify that the disciples throw their cloaks over both animals, and that Jesus rides atop both, which really allows the imagination to run wild. Other than humorous mental images, though, Matthew, too, includes a crowd and more cloaks, branches, and Hosannas and all the rest.

John adds so many other things to the story, including raising Lazarus and Mary anointing

Jesus' feet, that he shortens his Palm Sunday account. There is no animal at all — neither a colt nor a donkey. A crowd, a great crowd this time, is there with palm branches and Hosannas.

Luke, of course, is the account Bill just read for us. He, too, has a colt, but just one. There are cloaks, but no palms, and while there is a crowd, no one shouts, Hosanna. The disciples cry out with other language, just enough for some of the crowd to ask Jesus to make them stop, to make them be quiet. He says in response, "Well, if they don't shout, then the stones will."

The story is clearly the same, but there are four different accounts of that triumphant parade, which some folks have always found paradoxical. But the parade itself was a profound paradox. Theologian Justo González reminds us, "Triumphal entries were common enough to be recognized by early readers of the Gospels, and rare enough to retain their sense of the extraordinary. Since time immemorial," he writes, "conquerors claiming a city would enter it in a procession."¹ Roman generals returning from victory were celebrated this way, with the victor wearing a crown of laurel, riding a chariot pulled by white horses. Along the way, soldiers and citizens alike would

¹ Justo González, Luke, in the Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible series, page 226.

shout acclamation and sing hymns in honor of the conquering hero. And “Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem both parallels such solemn entries and contrasts with them.” He does not ride in a chariot; he rides atop a donkey. The disciples shout out in acclaim, just as the crowds had done many times before. He does not wear a crown of laurel, but he soon will wear a crown of thorns. Roman generals and emperors rejoiced over their conquests; read just a few verses further in Luke and you will see Jesus will weep over Jerusalem.

Different accounts of the parade is simply the reality of being human. Ask any four people to write down an account of what happened during the University of South Carolina women’s basketball national championship game. There will be similarities and differences in what everyone remembers, but you’ll all end up with the same sweet ending. No matter what the event, we all notice different things. Depending on our background or interests, different moments will strike us as particularly meaningful or strange. Some notice the mascot; others notice the starters. Some pay attention to the coach; others to the players who never come off the bench. Some watch the ball; others watch the buzzer run out. If four different people tell the story, there will be points of overlap and points of departure, because that is simply human nature. In the Gospels, these differences remind us that they were penned by humans.

But the difference between the parade that welcomes Jesus back to Jerusalem and the parades that welcomed Roman rulers back to Jerusalem, well, now that’s a different story. The similarities and disparities are too striking

to be coincidence. Jesus’ parade connects intentionally to parades of the past, but departs in key ways. Essentially, in creating a different sort of parade, he is inviting us into a different way of living, because his triumphal entry is heralding the coming Kingdom of God, and God’s ways have always looked different than the world’s ways. This truth shines through all four Gospel accounts of this day. And yet, each of them offer their own particular insights.

In addition to everything I mentioned before about Luke, Luke also repeats one word of this story more times than the others. Untie. *“Go into the village ahead of you ... and you will find tied there a colt. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’ So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, ‘Why are you untying the colt?’ They said, ‘The Lord needs it.’”* Tied. Untie. Untying. Untying. Untying. One mention of being tied. Four repetitions of untied or untying, and once you’re listening for it, you realize that Luke doesn’t need all four of them to communicate the chain of events. He does need them, however, to communicate what the chain of events points toward.

The first thing that happens on the first day of Greek class in seminary is you learn one word — *luo*. You learn this even before the alphabet, which means it basically looks like a bunch of scribbles that mean absolutely nothing to you. *Luo*, you are told, will be the verb that the class returns to for the entire year. Every time there is something new to learn about a verb, or how a verb is declined, or how a verb is translated, or anything else, you will learn it first with *luo*. It

is a short verb, only three letters. It is easy to pronounce, thanks be to God. And in terms of grammatical structure, it behaves. It is predictable. It follows a pattern and it does exactly what you would expect it to do, which cannot be said about all verbs.

You may have guessed this already, but the verb *luo* means "to untie." To unbind. To release. To loose. To set free.

On the last day of Greek class, our professor asked us, "Why was *luo* the verb we always returned to?" Ever the good students, we recited what we knew: it was short, it was easy to pronounce, and it was predictable. He simply repeated the question. "Why was *luo* the verb we always returned to?" And then he answered himself. "Because you cannot understand anything of the Gospel without it. *Luo* is, in many ways, the first and last word of everything Jesus is about. *Luo* is what Jesus himself always returns to."

Luo. To unbind. To release. To loose. To set free. "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" It makes perfect sense that Luke is the one who would emphasize this. After all, he is the one whose early accounts of Jesus' ministry include Jesus unrolling the scroll of the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue, and reading aloud, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." After

reading those words, he sat down again, and with all eyes still fixed upon him, he said, "*This scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*"

But if I understand the text, it's not just important that Jesus says "untie" so many times. It's when he says it — on Palm Sunday. He is very much still in the midst of his living. So often we think that everything Jesus promises us will be made real "someday." Someday in the future, after everything is said and done. But that is not what this story tells us. "Go and untie the colt," Jesus says, in preparation for the parade that will announce yet again who he is and what he is about. The untying he asks of his disciples is not a post-resurrection or even a post-crucifixion event. It is here and now. Very much in the midst of living — his living, and ours.

The invitation is for us now. To recognize that the great untying of the Gospel, the untying that sets us free from everything in the world that tries to limit us and hold us back, can happen now. Whatever it is that is holding you captive — be it confusion or uncertainty, perfectionism or exhaustion, fear or failure, health or history — Jesus does not offer a quick fix, but Jesus does assure us that we do not have to let it define us. Everything we think we are bound by, everything we think we have to be — *luo* it. Be released from it. Be set free from it. Because you know what? The Lord has need of you. Not because it can't happen without you. But because Jesus doesn't want it to happen without you. He didn't need the colt. He could have walked just fine. But even a colt, even a donkey, every bit of creation has a part to play in the story that is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that includes you. Whoever you are

and however you are right now — the Lord has need of you. Do not believe any lie that tells you otherwise.

In Luke's Gospel, the crowds don't shout Hosanna. But in Luke's Gospel, Jesus repeats and repeats, *lwo*. Untied. Unbound. Released. Set free. Redeemed. Saved. It is true for you, and it is true for you today. So join the parade that will announce the same truth and hope and promise to everyone else, won't you?