

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
13 April 2025

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Palm Sunday

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Riding for Our Lives”

Part of the Annual theme, *Thriving in Goodness for Good and for GOOD*
Touchstone words in Lent/Easter: *LAMENT* and *REJOICE*

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Luke 19:28-40

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

Other than this processional into Jerusalem, there is only *one other time* that Jesus rode an animal, instead of walking by foot or traveling by boat. Joseph placed Mary up on a donkey and led her and their yet unborn son to Bethlehem. In the womb, an animal carries Jesus to his place of birth. And here, less than a week away from the tomb, an animal carries Jesus to his place of death. Or, as the story goes, to his place of re-birth and resurrection.

Isn't that curious? Makes me wanna pay a bit more attention to this colt, or donkey, depending on which gospel you read.¹

Back then, donkeys were used by ordinary people for everyday use—pulling ploughs in fields, delivering goods to the market, or hauling water away from wells. In contrast, full grown horses were exclusively owned by the wealthy and mostly used in the military. In fact, as Jesus rode a colt or donkey into Jerusalem, at the same time, Pilate was riding a chariot pulled by war horses, sent there by Caesar to command an army to quote “keep the peace” during Passover, which is code for, “make sure no Jews cause any trouble for Roman rulers.”² Despite how loudly and majestically those horses were trotting, I doubt there were many people around. People ran *from* Pilate, not to him. Not so

¹ When we think of Palm Sunday we immediately think of “palm branches” and “hosannas” and “Jesus on a donkey.” But in case you didn’t notice, unlike other gospel writers, Luke’s story has none of these things: no donkey, no palms, no hosannas. **Luke** has a colt and some cloaks, and the crowd, of course. **Matthew** remembers the story as Jesus asking for a donkey AND a colt, and his account has waving branches and shouting hosannas (Matt. 21:1-11). **John** remembers the story as Jesus being greeted by a crowd specifically waving palm branches and shouting Hosanna, and then after that

parade of praise, he “found a young donkey” and sat on it (John 12:12-19). **Mark**, upon whom Luke probably based his story, says that Jesus sent two disciples ahead to find a colt that has never been ridden, and they did, and his story has the parade of praise following—complete with waving leafy branches, cloaks spreading, and hosannas shouting (Mark 11:1-11).

² Diana Butler Bass, “Palm Sunday Musings: Protest, Not Parade: The time that Jesus led a street protest,” *The Cottage* (13 April 2021), accessed on April 13, 2025 at <https://dianabutlerbass.com/the-cottage/>.

with Jesus; it seems he was always attracting a crowd. Especially riding atop a donkey colt. How unusual.

When we think of Palm Sunday we immediately think of “palm branches” and “hosannas” and “Jesus on a donkey.” But in case you didn’t notice, unlike other gospel writers, Luke’s story has none of these things: no donkey, no palms, no hosannas. Luke has a colt and some cloaks, and the crowd, of course.³

If you don’t know the difference between a colt and a donkey, I’ve got you covered. Did some research. Not all donkeys are colts and not all colts are donkeys. The word in the Greek is *pōlos*, which simply means the young of a horse or the young of a donkey, that is, the young of any “equine.” Colts simply refer to equine animals younger than 4 years old.

For the biblical narrative, it matters that it’s a donkey because of Matthew and John reminding us that this fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes

to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey...” (Zech. 9:9).

Theologically, it matters that Jesus rode a donkey colt because it implies an animal that humbly serves everyday people in everyday ways, as opposed to fighting in wars. And that’s enough to distinguish what Jesus rides from what Rome rides. We get the point. Jesus serves the people, Pilate keeps the people subservient.

Here’s the mind-boggling thing though. Any “colt” or young equine—donkey, horse, or otherwise—would be very unpredictable. I called up my extended family in Bowie, Texas; they breed and train cutting horses and I asked them about colts. My sister-in-law’s dad, John, said “colts are like toddlers—one moment wanting their own way, obstinate, no consideration of others—the next moment, they might be shy, consumed with their own world, their own perspective, their own needs—the next moment they might be all up in your business; inquisitive and curious, getting into everything every which way, not thinking

about consequences to their actions, just acting on their whimsy—and the next moment they could be bucking and kicking, getting spooked easily, totally wild and unpredictable.”

No wonder this colt that Jesus asked for was tied up! It would have been all over the place if it wasn’t.

My sister-in-law’s mom, Nancy added, “Colts have a power and a strength beyond their maturity level...you can get seriously injured if you’re not careful. To even begin to train a colt for riding, it takes extreme patience on the part of the *human* training them. They need to have a calming presence, a gentle nature and go very, very slow when you begin training.”

In other words, this is not something that could happen in one quick session before a parade takes place!

Nancy explained: “First, you might put them in a very small round pen, and you lead them around in a circle, many times, getting used to walking that route. Then you would introduce them to the saddle, let them look at it and sniff it before putting it on their back. Then you’d walk them around

with it, but mounting up in the saddle yourself. That process happens by stepping in one stirrup on one side, then getting down and stepping in the stirrup on the other side. Back and forth until eventually you get all the way up. Then you ride it round and round in that small, contained pen, training them to understand what the pull of the reins means, what the dig of a heel in the side means. No other distractions in the way, certainly not waving cloaks or lots of loud shouting people all around. That would spook them!”

It’s a miracle in and of itself that Jesus had never ridden a colt before and could just ride this one into town; Jesus must have had a calm and gentle way about him.

When we’re at their ranch, I know how careful my family is about putting myself or Damon or one of my nephews up on even the most well-seasoned, and well-trained, mature horses—because they know good and well that we the humans are not trained. But as Luke tells this story, *it’s not just Jesus that is untrained* as the rider of this animal, the *animal itself* is untrained! Did you catch that?

Luke says that Jesus asks two of his disciples to go up into the village ahead and there they'd find tied there a colt "*that had never been ridden,*" (vs30).

Untie *That One*, Jesus says—the One That Has Never Been Ridden—and bring it to me. What in the world was Jesus thinking? He's clearly not from Texas. A colt that has never been ridden before would be near impossible to ride; bucking, skiddish, not listening to (or taking) direction, impetuous, self-occupied, unpredictable and chaotic, ignorant of the consequences of his actions. Going this way and that way, sniffing here and there, following whatever caught his fancy.

Y'all, it is *this* detail that captivated me as I read this story this year. A story that I've read umpteen times before. In Luke and Mark's versions of this story, Jesus *chose* to ride into Jerusalem on a colt "that had never been ridden before"—a colt which would have been just as chaotic and unpredictable as the oppositional forces that he was up against that week as he faced denial, betrayal, conspiracy, trial, beating, humiliation, mocking, crucifixion, and death.

I don't know about you, but it sure seems to me that right now **we are Riding through Times That Have Never Been Ridden Before.** At least not by us!

We are riding through times that we have never ridden before and we feel every buck, every kick, every side turn and side eye, every tantrum, every unpredictable u-turn and unprovoked gallop and abrupt stop! And no matter how hard we pull on the reins of the system we thought was in place to control how things work—we cannot halt what is happening, it seems.

Yes, yes, friends, we are riding through times that have never been ridden before. Tariffs and trade wars are kicking stocks and 401Ks and bucking bonds and businesses. We are hoofed by the huge cuts to federal jobs, the elimination of DEI, climate care and clean energy, medical research and healthcare, veteran services and social services, USAID which feeds people who are hungry. We are socked sideways by the stripping away of rights for women, gay folks, trans folks, immigrants and refugees. Deportations tearing families apart with fear. Our hands are blistered and bleeding from pulling on reins that seem

to be doing nothing as power is removed from regulatory agencies, religious freedoms are ignored, judicial rulings are ignored, the constitution is ignored. We are bruised from the abuses of power that are putting everyone at risk.

The pace of change and the impact of these changes is devastating; the effects are far-reaching. Consequences are real. Nothing about these times is normal. These times have never been ridden before, not by us.

And this is true not only with what is happening in our country, but with what is happening in our own lives. There is someone here today processing a brand new diagnosis and the treatment that is to come. Someone who is reckoning with how to pay bills after losing their job this week. Someone wondering if their small business can survive. Someone who is exhausted from living with a chronic health condition and someone who is exhausted caring for them. Someone who is parenting a struggling child. Someone who is struggling in their marriage or partnership. Someone who is grieving as they watch their loved one experience changes in

memory or in movement. Someone who is realizing they cannot do everything at the same pace or with the same strength that they could before. Someone who is in the weeds of raising kids, who's barely following this sermon because they are thinking of how they are going to get kid A, B or C to location C, B, or A this week. Someone who is depressed or burnt out, exhausted or overworked. Someone who feels unseen, unheard, unloved, unknown. Someone who is facing a trial or a ruling from the court for themselves or a loved one. Someone who is looking for a job and not getting any bites. Someone whose bills are more than they can pay. Someone who's worried about their family halfway across the world who is living through war. Someone who is contacting their financial advisor wondering what this past week means for their retirement and livelihood. Someone who is in the midst of moving and uprooting their lives after decades in one place. Someone who is struggling to keep up in school. Someone who is living in that fresh fog of grief. Someone who is contemplating leaving this country because of the actions of this administration. Each of these

someone's has a name, Calvary. These are real people in our congregation.

We are in times that have never been ridden, and let me tell you—we *have no idea how to ride them, do we?* We are being bucked around and like bull-riding at the rodeo, it feels like we can barely last 8 seconds before the next blow comes.

So what are we to do? We who are in These Times That Have Never Been Ridden Before? We who feel every movement of unpredictable chaos?

Well first, we must **Bring to Jesus What Has Never Been Ridden.** Jesus tells the two disciples he sends ahead to the village to get the colt that has never been ridden that when people ask them *“Why are you untying it?”* to say to them simply, *“The Lord needs it,”* (vs 31).

The Lords need it. Instead of just leaving the “things of our lives that have never been ridden before” just tied up, out of sight and out of mind, trying to push our way through or numb our way through or pretend like they don't exist, Jesus says to us, “No, go right now and untie the things that

never been ridden before and bring them straight to me so I can get up on top of them and ride them out with you.”

The Lord asks us to bring to him all that is anxious and unruly and unpredictable in our lives. We are told, taught, and trained to handle things on our own. We are told, taught, and trained to just ride things out and wait for hard times to pass, grin and bear it. We are told, taught, and trained to trust in our government and leadership—whether your party or the other party is in charge—and they'll fix things; they are the ones with the power. We are told, taught, and trained that doctors have the cure to our diseases, financial advisors hold the keys to portfolio success, teachers will take care of education our kids, and big Tech will keep evolving to solve all of our global woes, but friends, we as people of faith, know better. We know we must first and foremost, bring to Jesus what has never been ridden before.

If you've never considered yourself a pray-er before, now would be a good time to start. If you've never acknowledged that maybe our government can't fix all the problems, now would be a good time to open the Bible

and read Genesis. Look to the Lord of all Creation to remind yourself that there is a power and strength that is not located in the leaders of this world, but in the divine nature of all that is Love...there is a Story that weaves together the story of one of us and the story of all of us and reminds us that we have come from God and we are going to God, and the journey along the way is going to be rocky and it might just help a little to have Jesus holding the reins.

Don't get me wrong here. We don't bring to Jesus all that has never been ridden before for Jesus to fix it or make it magically better, or to remove our struggle or take away our own agency or actions. No, no. We bring to Jesus all that has never been ridden before so that, and this is the second point for today, we can **give the reins to Jesus and watch how *he* rides.**

You've heard the country song, *Jesus take the Wheel*? It's not a favorite of mine, honestly. But consider this is the old-school version (even more old school than Johnny Cash or Loretta Lynn): *Jesus take the reins*.

You see, Jesus is first and foremost a rabbi, a *teacher*. He

teaches us through words, and through example how to ride through these times that we have never ridden before. Jesus cannot control or tame Pilate, the great Opportunist, who will put Jesus on trial...nor can Jesus tame or train the Department of Roman Efficiency, on whose cross he will be crucified. No, no. He cannot change or control *their* actions, but what he can do is control his own.

The two disciples bring Jesus the colt, help him up on it, and they give him the reins of what hasn't been ridden before. Because you see, in giving Jesus the reins (R E I N S), we are watching how he reigns (R E I G N S). Jesus reigns, not as a military warrior or political despot. He reigns as the Prince of Peace. As one who has a gentle nature, calming spirit, clear intuition, determined mind. The only way Jesus had a chance on that colt that had never been ridden, as one who had never ridden a colt before himself, was to have a calm demeanor, to be a non-anxious presence, to mount the chaotic unpredictable colt, with gentleness, centered power, and clear direction on where he was going. Finding power in the truth of Who he was and Whose he Was, not listening to what

the opposition was telling him, but repeating again and again, the message of love. Defying again and again, what people said was ‘unacceptable’ by instead accepting everyone. Even women. Even those of different ethnic groups or from different religions and lands. Even enemies. Even sinners. Even criminals. Even those without homes. Even those with homes. Even lepers or ‘untouchables.’ For Jesus, everyone was worthy of love and worthy of a place at the table. He healed on the sabbath, denounced religious leaders (even those who claimed his same faith), and didn’t bow down to Caesar. He did not do these things with a lot of flare, just with a steady, determined, unwavering faith.

You see, Jesus’ demeanor does not match the intensity of the animal which is brought to him. And if I’m honest Calvary, it’s been hard for me to not get all stirred up about what’s happening right now...it makes me feel a certain way, and that is fine. I’m sure Jesus felt a certain way too as he processed into the place of his death. But Jesus teaches us what it looks like to feel that kinda way and yet keep going. Keep riding. Keep one’s face focused. One’s

faith at the forefront, instead of one’s fear.

His demeanor remains steady and true to who he is and who he has always been—One who points to God’s kin-dom, not an earthly kingdom, and One who lives with Love as his guiding strength and power.

Jesus instructs us to say “the Lord needs us” to help us tap into the authority God gives us that flows from within. We learn from that is that we need to speak to authoritarian governments with our *own* authority...the authority of one who live with values and a moral compass and compassion and humility and collective wisdom, ones who treasure justice and believe peace is possible. Ones who look at other human beings as flesh and blood folks who love their families and are simply trying to do their best to make it through life. We’ve got to face times and tribulations that have never been ridden before head on, riding high with our heads held high, not cowering in fear.

And the gospel writer really wants us to see this point. Luke has Jesus ‘own’ this title of king. Jesus engages the pageantry of this parade. Jesus,

for the first time ever, rides on an animal, to make the point clear. Pilate and Rome? They are not the only ones who can sit up high. Luke invokes the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 118:26, as the crowds praise Jesus saying, “*Blessed is the One Who Comes in the name of the Lord*”—but Luke switches out ‘the One’ for ‘King’:

“*Blessed is **the king** who comes in the name of Lord!*” It is a statement.

Likewise, in the narrative of Jesus’ birth, Luke has the angels sing of God’s glory in the highest heaven with the words “peace on earth,” (Luke 2:14). But here, in this moment of riding in to Jerusalem, into this time of spiritual and political upheaval, the crowd sings instead, “Peace in *heaven*...”—bringing into crystal clear view that the reign of God, the reign that Jesus came to embody through his life and love—is for the entire cosmos and for all times, peoples, and places.

There is a cosmic dimension to the salvation that Jesus brings. Salvation, meaning, “balm” or “healing,” or in this specific form, “deliverance from harm, ruin, or loss.” To give the reins to Jesus and watch how he rides through these times that have

never been ridden—in *his day AND ours*—is to be reminded that God has a fuller picture and understanding than we do in this moment. There is a Cosmic Story being told, that involves this moment but is not encompassed or defined by it. In the end will come deliverance from harm, and ruin, and loss. Or as they say, “This too shall pass”—not because we sit back and relax and watch it pass—but because we invite Jesus to ride through these times with us and learn from him what it takes to ride straight into opposition, struggle, suffering, mocking, and even death itself—and to do so in a spirit of defiant and centering Love.

But watching Jesus ride and giving him the reins is not enough. No, the third thing we must do is **Saddle Up Ourselves**. We’ve been preparing for this moment our entire lives long. Baptism is but the beginning; this is what we’ve been training for, worshipping for, centering ourselves for, praying for, marching for, reading our Bible for—it’s for this moment...or for any time when our faith becomes everything, when we realize that the powers of this world are failing us so much that we would finally

understand that we live in God's realm, not Caesar's Palace.

How do we do this? How do we saddle up? Well, the two disciples that bring the colt that had never been ridden to Jesus first throw their cloaks up on the colt, creating a makeshift saddle for him. Similarly, as Jesus rode through the crowd, people spread their cloaks along the road. We've got to saddle up with whatever we have and use the gifts and resources we have at our disposal and trust that whatever we have is enough when we put it all together. We, collectively, are enough. The whole strategy of those with power is to make those without power feel like they'll never have it. They want us to go numb with information overload. The whiplash of the day-to-day chaos is their strategy. So, we saddle up and remain focused. We are equipped, even as we might have to get a bit creative or a bit subversive with our justice these days. We thought cloaks were for wearing and warmth, but maybe they are for waving around in distraction so that others can lay their cloaks down to pave a new road, a new path, a new liberation.

This was not a spectator sport. The people gave what they could to be involved. To be a part of the process. And even more, we must do the same. Because we ARE the Body of Christ today. Jesus isn't here except as he lives in and through us. Jesus empowered and implored us to be his hands and feet and heart and voice in the world. We—as people of faith who embody the Life and Love and Teachings of Jesus today—**we are the ones who must Saddle Up and take the reins for the sake of God's reign.** Jesus rode for our lives; will we ride for his? For his life and liberating love? Because a lot of people are doing things in his name that have to do with him or his love.

“Follow me,” Jesus says. Well, let's go.

Where do we not see love, and how can we be love? Where is peace lacking, and how can we bring a centering presence? Where is suffering and oppression and how can we offer a balm or supportive presence in the midst of it? How can we create sanctuary and safety for those whose very lives are hanging in the balance?

Each of us has what it takes to Saddle Up and Ride through these Times in the Name and Spirit of Christ. We are Riding for our Lives, after all. Jesus' entire ministry culminates and becomes crystal clear in the last week of his life. His gaze is steady and determined as he sets his face toward Jerusalem. He does not run away afraid or hunker down scared. He knows from where his power comes, he knows his dignity and worth and from where his very breath comes, and so he rides into oppression with a calm that is anything but cowardly. It is captivating and compelling.

And the longer we watch how he rides and let him take the reins of these times, the more we are prepared to Saddle Up ourselves. This is why we come to church. This is why we gather downtown in community to protest. This is why we flood our representatives with calls. This is why we show up on each other's doorsteps with casseroles, or drive each other to radiation appointments, or carpool and pick up or our neighbor's kids. It's not one person, one voice, on action. It's all of us together.

⁴ Mizoguchi, Karen, "Meghan Markle Tells Oprah Winfrey: I Was 'Silenced' and 'I Did Anything They Told Me to Do'," *PEOPLE Magazine* (7 March 2021), accessed on April 13, 2025 at

And lest we get swallowed up in those moments where it all feels too big and we feel like nothing we do matters or makes a difference, we learn from the fourth and final point in today's text: **we are not silent, or silenced.**

Jesus' response to the Pharisees when they ask him to tell his disciples to stop their praise and cheering is not unlike that now-famously-viral moment when Oprah Winfrey asked Meghan Markle the Duchess of Sussex in an interview as she spoke about her relationship to the royal family: "*Were you silent, or were you silenced?*"⁴

The Pharisees try to silence Jesus' disciples, and Jesus puts a stop to it by an equally halting statement: "*If these were silent, the stones would shout out.*"

What does that mean? It means the truth of Jesus' message and God's reign will sing through creation and through all time, outlasting and outliving any regime or government or political power or opposition. Even inanimate objects that cannot speak, know the

<https://people.com/royals/meghan-markle-oprah-interview-silenced-by-royal-family/>.

difference between injustice and justice, right and wrong, what is moral and what is inhumane.

Even stones can tell the difference between The God of all Creation and the men who create themselves to be gods.

There are all kinds of forces at work—some visible to us and many invisible—that are trying to silence the voice of Love, the power of Peace, the dignity and worth of all people. But we must not be silent. And we will not be silenced.

And here's the Good News, Calvary. Even as the literal voice of Jesus was silenced on Good Friday, even as he was crucified as a criminal when he himself was innocent, even as his followers and disciples became silent in their mourning and grief...the stones kept shouting. Yes, the Stone that was closed, sealed and quiet on Silent Saturday, shouted on Easter morning as it rolled away and released the Spirit of the Risen Christ into the world. The Empty Tomb Sang of Good News on Easter morning because the Stone spoke first as it rolled over and over and over

again until it was a barrier no more.⁵

God's Love no longer boxed in, but released into new Life, Salvation and Healing for all, the presence of Love living now unleashed in our lives.

Every time we kill or cast off what God loves, every time we write "in stone" new laws or orders that oppress or take life, know that there is a stone that will keep shouting, a stone that will keep rolling, again and again, so that the Risen Spirit of Christ is free to keep riding and reigning and in our lives.

So yes, we are riding for our lives right now. But ride on, people of God, for if we've learned anything from Jesus, it's that riding through the times that have never been ridden before ultimately lead to Life. From womb to tomb. Whether we have to birth something new, or resurrect something that's been killed—the reign of God is coming. The stones will not be silent. And neither will we. So let's take the reins and ride. What other choice do we have?

Amen.

⁵ As the 4th century hymnographer of Eastern Christianity, Ephraim of Syria, so poetically penned, "*it was the stones that praised Jesus by delivering up the dead they had contained.*" Quote found in: Bavon,

François, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 19:28-24:53*, ed. Helmut Koester, volume in *Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), pgs 4-12.