

Text: Matthew 20  
St Stephen's

April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007  
Palm Sunday

## God on a Donkey

It is a jarring reading, isn't it? Just that quickly praises turned to cries of condemnation. Triumph turned to seeming tragedy. Faithful followers all fled. Welcome to Holy Week, the week that changed the world.

I have a quiz for you. I'd like you to give the first answer that comes to your mind.

- **There is a home for sale down the road.** You have had your eyes on that home for a long time. It has come on the market, and the price seems just within reach. Almost. Maybe with a bit of a squeeze and some extra hours and a commitment to that second full time job. Do you buy the house?
- **Your daughter has been accepted at two colleges.** One is a prestigious ivy league school, one of the top five. It costs about \$40K per year to go there, but it has been a dream for decades that someone from your family might break into the ivy league schools, and now she has been accepted. The other is a good state school, which costs about \$18K per year. Actually the educational opportunities at the state school are fairly equivalent to the Ivy League school, but the reputation and the name aren't even close. She comes and asks you for advice. What do you say?

We lean in a certain direction in making these choices. We have an almost incurable instinct to climb **up the ladder**, and we believe that after a lot of hard work, what's at the top is expanded opportunities, well deserved rewards, and a real sense of purpose and value in life. So when we have the chance, **we climb**.

I want you to notice the **words that describe the journey up the ladder**... "hard work", "career opportunity", "upwardly mobile", "success", "pride", "achieve", "earn", "deserve"... "Up the ladder" is my phrase for it. Dallas Willard calls it "the human project". That is his phrase for our attempts to **take charge of the world**. The Bible calls it "**works**". We think it is the path to a rewarding life, so we climb.

But the Bible would question an “up-the-ladder” approach to life. God says **every time you go up the ladder, you’re in increasingly dangerous territory** when it comes to your spiritual and relational health. That is because it is all too easy on the way up the ladder to get addicted to **power and achievement**. You begin to wonder why all the other people aren’t as **smart** as you are. In the end, **work** exhausts you, burns you out and leaves you empty. **“Meaningless, meaningless”** was Solomon’s summary thousands of years ago, spoken from the very top of the ladder. Many today know exactly what he means. On the way up the ladder, **everyone is judged** by their capacity to help you rise. Maybe you find you don’t need your **spouse**. You find you **don’t have much time** for your kids anymore. **Friends** come and friends go. Because it’s all about getting up the ladder. In the end, the “Up the Ladder” agenda makes for a tough life.

The Bible does far more than warn about the journey up the ladder. The central theme of the Bible is all about **a different journey, a journey down the ladder...** we call that journey **“Grace”**, and we have been thinking hard about grace for these past two months.

The clearest passage in the NT about the journey down the ladder was penned by the Apostle Paul in Philippians 2...

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:  
Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!*

Philippians 2:5-8 (NIV)

Today we have a **special vantage point** for that journey down the ladder. Today we mark the start of **Holy Week** with Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, when he arrived on a donkey. It was another step down for him. But let’s **step back and start at the top**. The Bible tells us that **his journey down the ladder** started at **the very top**, in an

environment of unimaginable glory and honor and purity and beauty.

*"Being in very nature God"* Php 2:6

**The Father and the Son, together**, wrapped in glory and love. You have to take some time to think about that and wrestle with it, because if you can't see the top, you will never understand how far down he came, never understand grace. Then something remarkable happens. He lets it all go and **steps down, only for one reason, for love. Grace is love that steps down.**

**Paul phrases his journey like this...**

*did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.*

Php 2:6-7

He took flesh and was born, *"in human likeness"* - but not in a nice hotel or even in a hospital, but likely in a **cave**, used as a barn, and he was laid in a **manger**. The ground is hard. The place smells. It's dirty. His first **clothes** were simple pieces of cloth wrapped around his little wrinkled body. That's all there is. **God steps down.**

Within his first years he becomes a **refugee** in Egypt, running for his little life from a crazed King Herod. He would spend 80% of his years on earth in a small, out-of-the-way city named **Nazareth**, a **common** Galilean city. He learns to walk and talk there. He grew in a very simple home. He **shared a room** with his brothers and maybe even with his sisters during his earlier years. His step-Dad was a blue collar worker, and he became one, too.

Where does he go from there? **He becomes a servant.**

*taking the very nature of a servant,*

Php 2:7

It's **the one way love of grace, that always steps down.** He hangs out with crowds of people and invests himself in twelve special followers. He **has time** for people whom everyone else has given up on. He **loved**

**to get near** people, and they loved to get near to him. People came to him in the heat of the day and in the secret hours of the night. Little children and blind men and desperate parents and hungry rabbis and broken women and hard working businessmen. They came to him because of his one way love, because he stepped down...

So finally, at the end of the three years, **into Jerusalem** he comes. **Hosannas** ring out and fill the city. **Palm branches** of victory are lifted up. **People take off their coats** and lay them in front of Jesus as he rides in. The **disciples** are ecstatic. The **crowd** breaks into choruses of praise and festal shouts.

**God... on a donkey.** Take the time to look. Don't miss the donkey. Pilate would have laughed. Herod must have thought it was a joke. But look again. It is grace, the one-way-love of God that stoops and serves and steps down. It is no joke.

And now the final step is in sight.

*he humbled himself  
and became obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!*

Php 2:8

He has laid aside his glory and his power. He "*empties himself*", the scriptures say. **He has poured it all out, given it all up, stepped all the way down.** Can you hear the voice of his one-way love? Grace says there is...

- no distance he will not travel for you...
- no person is beyond his reach...
- no burden he cannot carry...
- no heart he will not transform...
- No price he will not pay...
- No sin he cannot heal...

### **Two closing thoughts:**

1) Too many people are **so busy climbing up, we miss God coming**

**down.** If that is too true of you, **take a moment. Look** at God on a donkey. Look at Jesus on the cross. Think about life up the ladder – it is tough. It exacts a heavy price. Managing the universe is hard work! Aren't you tired of having to manage the universe?

**You do not have to live your life climbing that ladder.** You can just let it go, you really can, just step right off that ladder, and put your life into his care. He will be right there.

He can always be found at **the same address** – at the bottom of the ladder – he journeyed a long way to get there - at the end of your rope. He will be right there, ready with a life of grace.

## **2) The world is just starving for this grace...**

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:*

Php 2:5 (NIV)

Paul says, you have opened your heart to his grace. Start spreading it around. Step down and serve. Stoop, and serve. No more condemnations & criticisms - Just start loving people with this one way love. Do it for him. Do it for them. Live a life of grace. The world is starving for this kind of love.