

Sermon Transcript: Promises

A couple of months ago, I went to Tennessee to help my sister and brother-in-law with my niece while my sister recovered from knee surgery. My niece is three, and she has lots of opinions. While I was there, I encountered what I think is a common parenting challenge, or just a challenge working with small children: when you ask a child to pick something—pick one thing—and they respond by picking two or three or ten.

It happened when I went to play dress-up with her and I asked her which costume she wanted to dress up in; she pulled out all of them because she liked all of them. Of course, it happened when we baked biscuits together. I asked her which one she wanted to eat before dinner, and she picked two because they were the two lumpy ones that she had made out of the leftover dough. It happened when asking her what book she wanted me to read before nap time; I was handed three books because those are her current three favorites.

But this phenomenon can get tricky depending on what the items are, right? Because presumably, I could have read all three books before nap time, which I did. And two biscuits? Easy peasy—you just put them together as a sandwich and eat them at the same time. She did not. And costumes? You can layer them one over top of the other and wear all of them at one time, right? That didn't quite happen. But what if you ask a kid to pick out a bike when you're on vacation? You're renting bikes for vacation. What if you ask them to pick out one bike and they pick out two? They can't actually ride both bikes, right? Logistically, that just isn't going to work out.

The Mystery of the Two Donkeys

So, what is this business in the Gospel of Matthew of two donkeys? Did you catch that? Does Jesus actually try to ride two donkeys into Jerusalem? You may not remember that part from your Sunday School upbringing. You may not remember that from your other church background. And that is because this story is in all four Gospels, but this is the only Gospel that has Jesus on two donkeys: a donkey and a colt, which is just a young donkey. So for ease, we're going to say "two donkeys." The rest of the Gospels just have one donkey.

I was talking to my husband this week, who is also a pastor, and I said, "What are you preaching on this week?" He said, "The Gospel of John: the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. What are you preaching on?" I said, "The Gospel of Matthew: the confusing entry of Jesus into Jerusalem." Because I had been pondering this two-donkey business. How did this work?

Matthew doesn't explain the logistics to us, does he? It is just very clear that there are two donkeys for a reason. It's not just one mistranslation; it's over and over in our scripture passage. There are two donkeys for a reason. In verse four, it tells us that this is happening to fulfill a prophecy. The prophecy is from Zechariah 9. That's cool, but why are there two donkeys in Zechariah? Well, the Hebrews had a way of describing things with poetic parallelism. That explains why Zechariah had two donkeys—it sounded pretty; the language is poetic. That was how they wrote.

But why did Matthew describe Jesus with two donkeys, especially since the other Gospel writers did not? They let go of the poetic stuff and it just went down to one donkey. Why did Matthew keep the two? The two donkeys can also be connected to Genesis 49:10-11, which is a promise from way back in the beginning of God's people. It says: *"The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet until tribute comes to him, and the obedience of the peoples is his. Binding his foal to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine, and his robe in blood, the blood of grapes."* Foal to the vine, and donkey's colt to the choice vine. Two donkeys.

Matthew wants us to understand that it is not just Zechariah's prophecy, but that Jesus is fulfilling a promise from way back to Genesis. Not only is Jesus entering as the humble king described in Zechariah, but as the ruler in Genesis whose reign will not end until all people are drawn to him. That is great news. Matthew describes this story with two donkeys to get our attention—to call our attention to the multiple promises that God made and Jesus is fulfilling.

Promises Made in Baptism

Speaking of promises, we had a baptism today. It's a beautiful, emotional, and exciting time. It can be easy to celebrate the baptism, think of it as a nice moment, and then move on—to assume that we're done, and not recognize that years from now, that baptism is still relevant.

See, Tucker didn't just get baptized. There's a moment in the service where you all are asked two questions. That's the clue for us. Why are we getting asked questions when we're not getting baptized and we're not the parents? Why are there questions asked of us? Well, we make promises on behalf of the members of the Church of Jesus Christ. In answering those questions, we make promises to guide and nurture the child in word and deed with love and prayer. And we promise to encourage them to know and follow Christ and be a faithful member of his church.

We make those promises not just as members of First United Presbyterian Church of Belleville, but we make those promises as members of the "Big C" Church, the Church of Jesus Christ. We make those promises and they remain relevant a year later, four years later, ten years later, twenty years later. So when a child that is baptized in this church wanders back in here after ten, twenty, or thirty years, the members of God's church still have promises to keep.

When someone we've never met before, who wasn't raised in this church, wanders in here and joins us, we know that they were baptized and their church members made promises on our behalf as the members of God's church. And so, we have promises to keep to that new person as well. God uses us to fulfill promises that we make to one another as the people of God. But God is the ultimate promise-keeper in Jesus Christ, and that is good news.

So today, you do not have to pick just one thing. You don't have to pick one thing to remember. In fact, I'd like you to take two things with you this morning: The first is that Jesus is the ultimate promise-keeper. And the second is that we have promises to fulfill to one another as well.

Amen.