

**Palm Sunday: *The Donkey***  
**Sunday, March 28, 2010: Luke 19:28-40**  
**The Rev. Peter Faass**

What about the donkey?

Have you ever wondered why donkeys keep appearing in the story of Jesus? There's the donkey that the pregnant Mary rode from Nazareth to Bethlehem during the census of Emperor Augustus. And then there's the donkey that is a part of the menagerie in the stable where Jesus is born. And, oh yes, the donkey that Mary rode as she held the infant Jesus when the Holy Family flees to Egypt, so to avoid King Herod's murderous wrath. Of course all of these donkeys are a part of Christian mythology. None of them are actually mentioned in the Biblical text. Imagine that!

But the donkey of Palm Sunday does appear in scripture. In fact all four scriptural accounts of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, speak of the donkey. Mark reports that Jesus sat on a colt, a young donkey. Matthew speaks of a mother donkey as well as her young colt. And Luke modeling Mark speaks just of the young colt. John reverts to just the adult donkey. This inclusion of the donkey in all four Gospels informs us that he is no minor character. There is something significant about him. The donkey is not just a simple vehicle of transportation for Jesus as he enters the holy city. So then what is he? What is his significance? What role does the donkey play in the story of Jesus' last week?

One of my favorite poets, Mary Oliver, contemplates this very question in her poem, "The Poet Thinks about the Donkey."  
On the outskirts of Jerusalem  
the donkey waited.  
Not especially brave, or filled with understanding,  
he stood and waited.

*How horses, turned out into the meadow,  
leap with delight!  
How doves, released from their cages,  
clatter away, splashed with sunlight!*

But the donkey, tied to a tree as usual, waited.  
Then he let himself be led away.  
Then he let a stranger mount.

Never had he seen such crowds!  
And I wonder if he at all imagined what was to happen.  
Still, he was what he had always been: small, dark, obedient.

I hope, finally, he felt brave.  
I hope, finally, he loved the man who rode so lightly upon him,  
as he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped, as he had to, forward.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Mary Oliver, "The Poet Thinks about the Donkey," *Thirst* (Boston:Beacon Press, 2006) p. 44

Most interpretations of Jesus' choice of a donkey to ride as he makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem observe that he did this to communicate his own humility. Donkeys were, and are humble, lowly creatures. Sturdy, reliable, strong, somewhat plodding, pliable with a touch of stubbornness; donkeys are used primarily as pack animals. They are far from glamorous. Donkeys are simple creatures that do a lot of heavy lifting without much protest, unlike their half - brother, the mule.

Jesus riding on a donkey is also a fulfillment of the prophet Zechariah. The implicit message of Jesus on a donkey would not have been lost on the Jewish population. The prophet proclaims, "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, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zech.9:9) Many of us are familiar with these words from the soprano aria in Handel's *Messiah*.

A man triumphantly entering Jerusalem on a donkey would have evoked the image of King Solomon who is reported in the book of I Kings to have entered the city in like manner. Solomon was also profoundly humble before God. Ergo in the minds of the populace waving palms and shouting Hosanna, the new humble king role models the old one.

In their book, *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan point out the absolute humbleness of this Jesus on a donkey procession. It was a, "peasant procession . . . Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class."<sup>2</sup> Jesus' procession then is set up as a foil - a stark contrast - for yet another procession entering Jerusalem at the same time.

This procession was led by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. He enters the holy city on a war horse. Pilate on horse back leads an imperial calvary and soldiers. One procession is humble and proclaims the peace of the kingdom of God that comes through non-violent love. The other procession is arrogant and proclaims imperial power, power that is achieved through subjugation and war.

As Borg and Crossan observe, these two processions and what they represent come to embody the central conflict of Holy week and lead to Jesus' crucifixion. It is the conflict between peace, love and justice as the way of humanity versus war, power and injustice.

Ultimately the triumphal entry on a donkey is a prophetic sign . . . it is an act of parable. During his entire ministry Jesus challenged all assumptions. He turned peoples understanding of the world inside out and upside down. Your mortal enemy the Samaritan ends up being your best neighbor. The tax collector, not the Pharisee, leaves the Temple justified. The leper leaps with joy. The prostitute is assured entry into God's kingdom. And now your saving king, who you have been waiting centuries for, enters the city on a humble, lowly donkey.

Following behind Jesus and the donkey on that first Palm Sunday are the king's subjects: fishermen, farmers, carpenters, the blind, Samaritans, harlots, demoniacs, the *om-haartez*, and the people of the land. The subjects are humble and lowly just as their king is humble and lowly. Jesus riding the humble and lowly donkey then becomes the object lesson of his entire ministry; it distills the essence of the good news of God's Kingdom: "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." (Matt. 23:12)

As followers of Jesus we are to work to be humble like the humble Jesus riding the humble donkey. Our world and culture sure could use a huge infusion of humility these days.

Despite the egregious behavior of many, and the less than subtle envy many have of them, I am here to tell you that the elitism, status-seeking, power- hungry, money-grubbing, possession-crazed, education-bragging, exclusivity-seeking, orthodoxy-rating people, who believe in the right connections and the right memberships as the way of life, are of no account in God's kingdom. In fact,

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<sup>2</sup>Marcus Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006) p. 2

these behaviors are obstacles to its entry.

In his Letter to the Philippians, St. Paul tells the faithful, *“in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus . . . [who] humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.”* (Phil. 2:3-5,8) Being of the humble mind of Christ is the entry portal to God’s kingdom. It is our ticket.

Mary Oliver wrote of the donkey. “I hope, finally, he felt brave. I hope, finally, he loved the man who rode so lightly upon him, as he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped, as he had to, forward.”

That is my humble prayer for us as we step forward into Holy Week with Jesus: that we might be brave and love the man who rode on the donkey. That we might ploddingly, but determinedly, lift one dusty hoof after another dusty hoof, as we humbly love the humble man who loved us so much that he died on a cross and rose from the grave to give us authentic life.

Amen.