

Questions for Lent
#6 Are You Willing to Be a Donkey?

Matthew 21: 1-11

One of the classic images of the Old West is that of the gnarled, grubby gold miner trudging through the creek-beds, canyons, and mountain passes with his trusty, heavy-laden donkey by his side. Miners didn't use horses because they were not sure footed enough to traverse the rough terrain, the narrow, winding trails, the slippery creek-side stones. After all, a successful miner had a donkey loaded with the most valuable cargo in the universe: gold dust and gold nuggets. Such treasure could only be trusted to donkeys.

I used to think that the donkey was used because his smaller feet and shorter legs made him more stable on the trail; or that some innate intelligence made these creatures more capable of picking out the best track to follow.

Almost the exact opposite is the case. It seems that donkeys feel safest and most secure when they can clearly see where the edge is, where the greatest danger lies. What unnerves a donkey is knowing an edge is near, but not being able to see it and thus gauge the best path to take.

In today's gospel text, it's easy to get swept up in the celebration of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem. For once, all the people around Jesus seem to be supportive. For once people appear excited about his presence. For once the crowds are confident in his abilities.

To be sure, their shouts indicate that there was still a general misconception about his true identity - he's called variously by the crowds **"Son of David"**, **"the one who comes in the name of the Lord,"** and **"prophet."** By citing the royal acclamations from Zechariah 9:9,

"Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Matthew brings all the expectations of the Messianic king to this dramatic scene.

Over against all the hoopla and hosannas, the gospel writer is careful to emphasize an almost seemingly discordant note in this celebratory theme. Jesus specifically instructs two disciples to

appropriate for him a very particular mount, a young donkey colt. Matthew's text even carefully notes the colt's mother, a donkey, and includes her in the procession. Matthew doesn't want anyone to misread the identity of Jesus' mount and suppose that this colt was some young, high-spirited horse, a far more obvious noble steed.

No, Matthew wants readers to be perfectly aware of the incongruity between the crowd's shouts, the royal processional, and the humble, simple beast of burden upon which Jesus rode.

I. Donkeys were workhorses. Donkeys were the common pack animals used by hard working laborers, landowners, and merchants alike. More exotic, long distance travel and rich transport caravans employed the more demanding, expensive, and haughty camel to carry big loads. The donkey was a much simpler, less impressive worker. It accomplished the most mundane of daily tasks in small villages and inside the big cities as well. Gray, substantial, and subservient, donkeys were a necessary, but unexceptional part of first-century life.

The donkey is clearly Jesus' own choice of mount for his entrance into Jerusalem. Riding on that humble beast, Jesus both inhabited the words of Zechariah's prophecy and illustrated the dual nature of his messianic identity.

He was King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

But he was also servant of servants, a workhorse, and helper of helpers.

While he was ushered into Jerusalem with a royal processional, he rode on the steed of the simplest peasant. The back of a donkey doesn't put one up above the heads of others. In fact, sitting on the short-legged beasts put the rider pretty much at face-to-face level with a standing crowd. Jesus couldn't impressively ride through a crowd mounted on a donkey. He could only ride in the midst of the crowd, being as much a part of the crush as were all the others.

Church tradition tells us (though none of the gospels report it) that this wasn't Jesus' first donkey ride. Matthew's text doesn't detail how Joseph traveled with Mary to Egypt and back to Nazareth again. Nor does Luke's gospel describe how Mary and Joseph journeyed to Bethlehem. But all of us have in our heads the picture of a pregnant Mary perched on the back of a sturdy

donkey. Our mind's eye puts her back on that beast for the escape to Egypt and the homeward trek to Nazareth after Herod had died.

The church has long suggested that in honor of the donkey's humble service to Jesus, the animal was rewarded with a permanent "sign of the cross," for most donkeys do show a distinctive black cross pattern across their sturdy shoulders. Despite this lip service from church tradition, the donkey still remains far beyond the pale of glory. Little girls don't dream of riding across summer fields on a little donkey. The Kentucky Derby doesn't blow the herald horn for a herd of dinky donkeys to race around the track. Everyone from Shakespeare to Pinocchio knows that fools and dolts are depicted as donkeys. Of course, the donkey's other common name says it all: a donkey is just an . . . well, you know what that word is.

II. Yet, if the mission of the church is to carry Christ into the world, then each of us is called to be a donkey. There's no particular glory in being a donkey. There are only long trails, steep roads, heavy loads, and little or no recognition for a completed job.

Nevertheless, look at what we're carrying. The King of Kings. The Prince of Peace. The Lion of the Tribe of Judah, and the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

You and I are called to be a donkey. Donkeys are known for strong backs and sure feet. Donkeys carry a lot of burdens, and they carry their loads along pathways that are too treacherous for others to walk.

Of course, donkeys are known for one other characteristic: they can be stubborn, obstinate, stiff-necked. From the days of the Hebrews in the wilderness, God's people themselves have often been identified as stiff-necked (Exodus 32:9; 34:9). Perhaps this same stiff-necked quality added to Jesus' choice of the donkey - a stubborn little steed with a mind of its own, even though it would work hard and long. Sound familiar?

So I end this message with a question: Will you be a donkey?

Will you carry Christ? Wherever he goes? However he goes.

Will you walk cliffs? Will you be cliff-walkers who journey the edges between this world and the next, between hate and love, between war and peace? Will you not be afraid of the edges and the extremes?

Will you be a donkey?

Will you be humble enough to be a beast of burden? To carry the burdens of others? To carry your cross?

When I served a small church just west of Henderson, TX, there was a man in the community that loved the LORD and wished to serve him. He couldn't teach Sunday school or sing in the choir. He couldn't read scripture or pray in public. He couldn't usher or even be an acolyte but he desired to serve the LORD.

He settled on a task that he could do to share Christ love with his neighbors. Whenever there was a death in the community. He would come to the house the night before the funeral and pick up the family's shoes. He took them to his home, cleaned and polished them. Then he returned them to the front porch so the family would have them to wear to the funeral. A small thing but a loving thing that communicated to the family love in a very specific way. A simple way to carry the burdens of his neighbors.

Finally, will you be a donkey? Will you shout with joy and praise God, welcoming the divine's presence with **"Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."**

Ever wonder why the donkey is the only animal in the Bible that speaks? Karl Bart at his 80th birthday party offered this testimony:

"In the Bible there's talk of a donkey, or to be quite correct, an ass. It was allowed to carry Jesus to Jerusalem. If I have achieved anything in this life, then I did so as a relative of the ass who at that time was going his way carrying an important burden. The disciples had said to its owner: 'The Master has need of it.' And so, it seems to have pleased God to use me at this time. Apparently I was permitted to be the ass which was allowed to carry as best I could a better theology a little piece"

Will you be a donkey this Palm Sunday?