

“The Donkey and the Lamb”

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4-5-20 Palm/Passion Sunday

Based upon Num. 22:21-39; John 12:12-19

Today is Palm Sunday, the day we remember how Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey while crowds gathered around him cheering and crying “Hosanna, God save me!” In honor of that donkey, I posted a separate video of a little visit I had recently with a donkey named Elsa, who belongs to the Porters in our congregation. I hope you will check it out at some point, since I don’t know how to splice it into this service as a children’s chat. Elsa, like most donkeys, bears dark markings on her back that are shaped like a cross, a gift, according to legend, that Jesus gave to all donkeys in gratitude for the love and help of the one his disciples borrowed for the parade. But today, I want to turn that legend around a bit to think about what gift the donkeys in Scripture offer us as we contemplate the Passion narrative this Holy Week. We have learned in our Wednesday night Bible study this Lent that even ordinary objects like thorns and oil and water are loaded with theological symbolism in Scripture. The same is true for many of God’s creatures, especially donkeys. The more we understand what they convey, therefore, the more we can learn from them about Jesus and ourselves.

Donkeys are mentioned about 150 times in the Bible, making them rank number eight on the top ten list of most referenced animals in Scripture. Most of those references are to wild donkeys or to donkeys as livestock. But there are a few donkeys that stand out from the pack so to speak, and Balaam’s donkey is one of them. None of the other animals in Scripture talk! Scholars call the story of Balaam and his donkey “didactic fiction” or fable. We don’t have to believe that God actually made the donkey talk in order to learn from this story; the Jews who included this story in their Scriptures most likely did not. But they did believe that these stories taught valuable theological lessons that were very true, even if the stories were not.

Balaam, the donkey’s owner, had been hired by a Moabite king to come and place a curse on the people of Israel, who were just at the point of moving into the Promised Land and were unsettling all the surrounding nations in the process. Balaam was a sort of freelance seer-for-hire, who claimed to know things and have the power of God behind him. Although he initially refused the job, eventually he did accept it and set out with his donkey to meet with the king. According to the text this made God mad, so God sent an angel to block his way. Despite his claim to be a “seer,” Balaam could not see the angel in his way; his humble donkey could, however, and reacted by turning off the path and going into a field. Surprised and frustrated by this unexpected detour, Balaam beat the donkey for his disobedience and resumed his journey. Again the angel came and blocked the way, and again the donkey received a beating after he scraped Balaam’s leg against a wall trying to avoid the angel. Finally, when the angel appeared the third time, the donkey just lay down and gave up right where he was. Balaam was so incensed and embarrassed by his donkey’s disobedience in the presence of the messengers who had come to collect him, that he was going to kill the donkey. That was when God opened both the donkey’s mouth and Balaam’s eyes. The donkey pointed out how unfair Balaam was being given his past record of obedience, and the fact that there was an angel in the way. Chastened by the animal’s wisdom and power of discernment, Balaam went on to bless Israel instead of curse it.

Now no one knows exactly why this story was included in Scripture. Most scholars assume it was to make Balaam look bad. Donkeys are known for being stubborn and are therefore seen by many anthropocentric human beings as symbols of stupidity. But in this case Balaam was not as bright as his beast. Thus, one Reform Jewish website says this is a parable about “the folly of a human ego self-destructively preoccupied with its own agenda instead of discerning God’s. It is (according to the parable’s sequence) about being (1) rerouted, (2) squeezed, and finally, (3) stopped until you get your eyes opened and see what’s really going on.”¹

In many ways, that lesson is the same one that Palm Sunday offers us, although there is no angel blocking Jesus’ way as he heads into Jerusalem, and he and the donkey are a happy pair. But his procession into the city for the Passover was an eye-opener in more ways than one. For the authorities who watched a huge crowd of adoring followers welcome Jesus like their Messiah, waving palm branches, the ancient symbol of Israel born out of the Maccabean revolt, it was a sign that they were losing control. After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, all kinds of people heard about him (as you would imagine they would) and wanted to come and see him. That was bad enough, but when Jesus came into town on a donkey, then I’m sure some of them worried even more, because as John explained to his readers, the prophet Zechariah had prophesied, “Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming sitting on a donkey’s colt!” In other words, riding a donkey in a procession into Jerusalem didn’t make you a “loser” to those who knew the Scriptures. Riding a donkey into God’s holy city meant you were or claimed to be “God’s anointed.” King David, the most revered of all of Israel’s kings rode a donkey, and his famous heir, Solomon, rode a mule. Thus, although donkeys are humble beasts, in Jewish tradition they were associated with both royalty and God.

We know how the story goes from here. The authorities decided they had to stop Jesus. The most compassionate interpretation of their motivation is that they feared that Rome would destroy them, take control of the Temple, or forbid Passover worship if Jesus was perceived to be a Jew seeking to overthrow Rome and become king. The least compassionate interpretation is that the authorities were jealous of Jesus and feared losing their own power. Either way it wasn’t long after this parade that crowds were cheering “Crucify him” instead of “Hosanna,” and Jesus was on a cross. But the point of today is not to blame them or feel smug because we can see now what they could not then. There’s more to this story than good guys and bad guys because the donkey Jesus rode was a colt, a young male donkey (young female donkeys are called fillies); and as is often the case in John’s gospel especially, that adds another layer to the story for those with eyes to see. Although I have been in ministry for more than 20 years, I didn’t know about this layer myself until I started researching donkeys in the Bible.

First, a little bit of background. If you go back to the Old Testament, back to the laws in the Torah, there are many laws about sacrifice because in keeping with the culture and the times, God’s covenant included the practice of animal sacrifice. The system wasn’t created because God had to have animals to eat, however, or because God needed blood to be appeased. The

¹ Kushner, Lawrence, “*Balaam’s Talking Ass*,” ReformJudaism.org; retrieved Mar. 30, 2020 from <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/balak/balaam%E2%80%99s-talking-ass>

sacrificial system was really designed for the people of Israel, to help them remain in a covenant relationship with God even after they were rich and successful and comfortable in the Promised Land. Every time they offered a sacrifice of their firstborn male lambs and calves and goats etc., the people were invited to remember the Passover, when God spared their first-born male children death and liberated the Hebrews from slavery. They were prompted to remember how everything they had in the Promised Land came from God, and how important it was for them to keep their economy grounded in God's provident grace, not adopting the materialism of the Canaanite culture around them.

Now not all firstborn males could be consecrated to God through sacrifice. Only kosher or "clean" animals were sacrificed according to the Law. (Ex. 13:11- 16). Clean mammals were those that chewed their cuds and had divided hooves, such as cows, goats, and sheep. Unclean mammals had neither of these traits, or one but not the other. That's why pigs, which have split hooves but don't chew their cuds, are considered unclean, as are camels, which chew their cuds but do not have split hooves. Instead of being sacrificed, unclean firstborn animals were "redeemed" by their owner's giving money instead of the animal to the priests. Similarly, since Yahweh abhorred human sacrifice, human firstborn males were also redeemed by their parents giving money to the priesthood, which was created by God so that families would not have to consecrate all their firstborn sons to the priesthood themselves.

Anyway, all of this may seem very complicated and unnecessary to us, but it made perfect sense back then. What doesn't seem to make sense is that in the midst of these laws, there is a rule which singles out donkeys. *Exodus* 13:13a says that "Every firstborn donkey you shall redeem with a sheep." Since donkeys aren't kosher or clean, one would expect them to require redeeming. But why redeem them with a sacrificed lamb instead of money? Liberal branches of Judaism don't have an explanation since they see the whole sacrificial system as archaic; but ultra-orthodox branches of Judaism record that the reason donkeys had to be redeemed with lambs is that even though they are not kosher, ever since the Exodus, firstborn donkey colts have been born with a little *kedusha* or holiness in them. God gave them this holiness in recognition for the work that donkeys did during the Exodus carrying Moses and all the people's belongings without complaint. It was insufficient, therefore, for a donkey to be redeemed with something unclean like money. It had to be redeemed with another clean animal that had already been consecrated to God, like a firstborn male lamb. Only when this was done was the donkey freed to be the beast of burden he was made to be.²

All of the gospels agree that Jesus rode into Jerusalem rode on the colt of a donkey not a filly, and in John's Gospel, Jesus is consistently depicted as "the lamb of God." "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world," John the Baptist cries out in John when he sees Jesus. (John 1:29). John rewrote the Passion narrative provided by the Synoptics so that instead of Jesus celebrating the Passover and then being killed, Jesus was killed *on the day that the Passover lambs were sacrificed for the upcoming feast*. Put all these images together and we can see more clearly that when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, he wasn't coming to become a king

² See e.g. Kaganoff, Rabbi Yirmiyahu, "Redeeming a Firstborn Donkey?" Baltimore Jewish Life, Jan. 28, 2020, retrieved from <https://baltimorejewishlife.com/news/news-detail.php March 18, 2020>; Miller, Lori Samlin, "Donkey Redemption a Rare Ritual in Judaism," Jewish Exponent, Sept. 14, 2016, <https://www.jewishexponent.com/2016/09/14/donkey-redemption-a-rare-ritual-in-judaism>.

like David or Solomon, a political or military leader ready to take control of the Promised Land. He even said as much later when he talked with Pilate. “My kingdom is not of this world.” (John 18:36). Jesus entered Jerusalem as a “Redeemer” King. He came to redeem or save the whole world, from the richest and most powerful to the littlest donkey.

The authorities couldn’t see that. They felt their power was being challenged. And later, the people who turned against Jesus or refused to believe in him notwithstanding his many signs and miracles couldn’t see that. Some, like Judas, were hoping when Jesus rode into town it was to begin a revolution to overthrow the Romans. Some in the crowds were looking for a savior, who could get rid of the problems in their lives and the world. Some were looking for a Messiah in the political sense—new great king of Israel. But few were looking for a spiritual Savior, someone who came into the world for all people, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, and for the whole of creation. Few were looking for someone who wanted to free them to be the people that God had made them to be.

Are we looking for a Redeemer King any more than they were? I wonder. There are lots of ways of understanding redemption in the Bible, and many of us have grown up with the understanding that Jesus died for our sins, which is grounded in part on the sacrificial lamb imagery in *John*. So, we may be looking for or expecting this. But when we keep in mind that the whole point of the sacrificial system was about strengthening our relationship with God and preserving our God-given identity, not about appeasing a wrathful God, then we can see that redemption Jesus offered is about much more than being saved from eternal damnation or death. Redemption is about being liberated for life. It’s about someone giving something of themselves, so that something or someone can have a new purpose or identity. As Jesus-the-lamb freed the donkey to be a donkey, so he frees us to be the people we were made to be by showing us and telling us what that should look like. But we can’t be those people until we, like Balaam, learn from the donkey what God wants from us. More often than not, that requires our being rerouted and squeezed and even stopped in our tracks until we can see how to be sources of blessing instead of curses in our world. Are we any more open to this than the people were in Jesus’ day?

In one of his blog posts, author/pastor Brian McLaren used his imagination to retell the Palm Sunday story without the donkey, from the perspective of those who wanted a military and political savior. What if, he imagined, Palm Sunday had happened as a carefully planned assault on the Roman Jerusalem? “Operation Sacred Vengeance” was the name of the rebel campaign. Jesus and his disciples would have planned for weeks storing weapons, arranging relays. Then on Palm Sunday, Jesus would have mounted a white horse, and carried a huge sword hidden in a palm branch. His disciples and followers would have been similarly armed, all hiding their weapons behind palms. As the city came into view, Jesus would have given a rousing speech: “It is wrong for the heathen idolaters to have power over the faithful people of God! Today we make the persecutors suffer. Who is with me in our holy cause?” The crowd would have shouted “We are,” and roared across the valley chanting “Crush the Romans!”³

³ *Animating Illustrations*, “cf. Donkey, HOMILECTICSONLINE.COM, citing <http://brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/palm-sunday-2011-end-of-violence.html>; retrieved Mar. 18, 2020.

That's not what happened of course, and we, who live on this side of Easter, should be grateful for it. But even now, not everyone wants the kind of freedom that our Redeemer King offers. There are still many who want God in their lives to rid them of all their problems and can't believe in a God who won't. There are still many who want God to redeem some people but are threatened by a God who would redeem all. There are still many who reject God's way because they are too attached to their own power or sense of self. In effect, it's always Palm Sunday. So, as we enter this Holy Week, think about who you see and what you cry when you see Jesus riding on a colt. Right now the virus has stopped us in our tracks, so it is a good time to take stock. May that humble and holy donkey open our eyes to see our Redeemer on the road in front of us, and may the Spirit give us the wisdom to embrace the freedom he offers, so that going forward, we can be the people that God made us to be. Amen.