

### **Beast of Burden**

Biblical preaching professor, Karoline Lewis wrote that she read someplace where someone said, “This is the Lentiest Lent we have ever Lented.” She followed that statement with one of her own, “And so this may very well be the Holiest Holy week we have ever Holated.”

Here we are on Palm Sunday, a day that through time and tradition, we have turned into a grand celebration with pomp and circumstance. I remember when I was growing up that there was a church in Atlanta that would gather in costume and parade through the streets of Midtown waving palm branches while a man dressed as Jesus rode on the back of a donkey. Clips of that parade could often be found on the local news with people oooing and awwing over the extravagance that took place on Palm Sunday. I won’t sugar coat it, I too have participated in my fair share of creating a massive event on Palm Sunday as it always seemed to be a day where children gathered to wave palm branches while adult choirs marched in with shouts of “Hosanna!” And, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” And yet, as I look out today, across empty pews and into a camera, I am aware that today, may be the closest we have ever come to actually celebrating Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem in the manner for which it was meant. A march into Jerusalem. A humble march towards the cross.

It is very likely that on the other side of Jerusalem, the government was throwing their own parade. One with horses and chariots and armed military marching in the streets. It is possible that they wanted to show those gathered in Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover that they were in charge. They wanted to show that while the Jews may be there to celebrate when Moses led them through the waters to freedom that they are in fact, very much under the control of the authorities. And coming through the opposite gate is Jesus, riding on a donkey. Yes there were most likely two parades happening simultaneously. One with the authorities showing their power over the people and the other showing the humbling spirit of mercy and love, riding in on a donkey.

The donkey is an interesting animal to say the least. Have you ever really thought about the donkey in this story? About what it truly meant to have Jesus ride in on the donkey? Yes, it was a way of fulfilling the prophet’s vision, but I think it goes deeper than that. I think donkeys are greatly underrated as a species.

“It takes a special kind of donkey to be able to walk into the sanctuary and be a part of worship,” he said.

I had been trying to secure a donkey for Palm Sunday festivities when the owner of the donkey shared those words with me. I was a little confused by that statement, but it made me giggle nonetheless. But, as I later thought about that “lowly donkey” I began to realize that there was a great deal of truth in that statement. I began to realize that in some ways we are all special kinds of donkeys, or at least we should be. We should humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord. We should come humbly to worship the God who serves us day after day with love and grace and mercy. It is indeed a special kind of donkey who can be in the presence of the Lord.

I like to imagine that the donkey in this story, this special donkey, the donkey Jesus is riding on, is the grandchild of a donkey who had traveled to Bethlehem from Nazareth during a census, carrying on his back a young woman who was great with child. I imagine among the crowd gathered in Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday were Jesus' mother and brothers and sisters and that, not wanting to separate a mother from child, they brought the nursing donkey and colt with them to help carry their loads. I imagine the donkey and colt must have felt safe and had a sense of trust among the disciples and Jesus to go so willingly. I also imagine that this parade is not the end of the story for that little donkey...

But why a donkey? Why not have Jesus ride in on a gallant horse?

Donkeys are herd animals, they do not like to be alone, (perhaps this is why Matthew has the Disciples taking both mother and the colt). This is why you see donkeys, even if it is a singular donkey, in a pasture with other animals. Donkeys adapt to their herds and are very protective over the other animals. A donkey will protect the sheep and goats in its care fighting off wolves and foxes and other predators. They have a sense of loyalty to the herd and to their master. They have an amazing memory and can recall being someplace even if it was years ago. Donkeys are not as stubborn as we think, they simply will resist doing something if they feel it will put them in harm's way. They have the capacity to sense danger. Donkeys have been known throughout history and across geographies to be used as beasts of burdens: they are used for carrying and transporting people and their goods.

So here is Jesus, and his herd of disciples. Jesus, the one who calls himself the Good Shepherd, the one who protects and cares for his sheep, remaining loyal to his people, coming across to some of those authorities as stubborn, but in reality lives into his truth knowing he is there to be a beast of burden for the world: carrying the weight of sin and the heaviness of the disenfranchised and the load for those hurting, hungry, and in need.

This donkey is not just a humble beast who carries Jesus through this parade of palms, he is symbolic of Christ himself. From the very beginning, a donkey has been there and carried Jesus in some way: into Bethlehem carrying his mother who was great with child...carrying the weight of this young woman's burdens that she was to give birth to this child who was the Son of God. Now carrying the weight of a young man who was riding towards his own death. And so the donkey rides onward into Jerusalem.

Matthew talks about the large crowd that gathered when Jesus entered Jerusalem. And there was a large crowd, as people from all over gathered for the Passover that week. I also imagine that the majority of those who laid cloaks in the streets and waved branches were part of Jesus' followers. Matthew goes on to say that Jerusalem was in a state of turmoil-there was a sense of chaos and uncertainty among the people. They waved palm branches, a symbol of the Ancient Eastern and Mediterranean world for victory and peace. Crying out in the streets Hosanna! Which when we say it in our modern world, makes us think of shouts of praise and adoration, yet Hosanna in the Hebrew means, "Save us, we pray!" Waving branches of peace the people shouted for God to save them as Jesus rode into Jerusalem, carrying the weight of the people on his shoulders and riding this beast of burden towards the cross.

As I said earlier, I don't think the donkey's story ends here. I like to think that this donkey would have been hitched to a cart and stood there on Cavalry as he waited on the body to be taken off the cross and then carried a lifeless Jesus to the tomb where he was buried. The beast of burden now carrying with him the grief of those who loved Jesus, the fear of those who followed him, and the guilt of those who denied him.

This may just end up being the most fitting way to begin Holy Week.

There was one other time I experienced the uncertainty that would happen during holy week: it was on Palm Sunday, April 1, 2007, when my first child, my son, was stillborn. That week was bleak and dark and yet there was something about being able to walk through Holy Week, knowing that God had also lost a son and knowing that love comes out victorious over death that gave me comfort during that time. I'm sure many individuals have their own stories of chaos during this season, but as for the church universal, this is the first time, at least in my lifetime, that we face such turmoil as we enter Jerusalem for Holy Week.

There is something so perfect and humbling about the way we are forced to approach this Palm Sunday. Like the early church, we gather for worship in our homes. We live in a time of chaos and confusion-a time of great turmoil. We come waving a palm, a sign of peace as we cry out, "Save us!" But, because of who we are and whose we are, as we lay our palms down, we can also lay down our worries and our burdens, knowing with confidence and faith that Christ will take those worries to the cross and eventually a new day will dawn and we will find peace even in times of chaos.

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