

Donkey Dreams

By Rev. Durrell Watkins, M.A., M.Div.
Palm Sunday, 2008 (Matthew 21.1-11)

The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. In the version we heard today, we heard that the Teacher had need of both the donkey and the young colt, but the paraphrase that we use left out what other translations make clear...The disciples saddled up BOTH the donkey and the colt, and Jesus sat on THEM.

Mark, Luke, and John have Jesus riding a single donkey, which is silly enough: *The Messiah came to town riding on a donkey...* Big, full-grown Jesus, 5'7" / 5'8" ...145#, feet dragging the ground as he bounces along on a tiny grey donkey. But Matthew's version is especially ridiculous. Matthew has Jesus riding on two animals at the same time, like an action hero in an old Western. Except instead of straddling two racing horses dragging a stage coach to certain destruction, Jesus is straddling two donkey colts bouncing in to Jerusalem. Luke, Mark, and John show a bit more imaginative restraint, and they have Jesus bouncing in on a single donkey, but Matthew goes over the top by having Jesus ride on two.

The image is meant to be ridiculous. Disruptive. Like in one of the Harry Potter films when the Hogwarts students learn to imagine their worst fears being healed by some ridiculous image. Harry's friend, Ron, is afraid of spiders, so he imagines a giant spider on roller skates. The spider is helpless and falls on its arachnid face as its 8 legs sprawl out in every direction. A ridiculous image can help us laugh in the face of adversity. To laugh at the horrific makes it less horrifying, and if it's less horrifying, it has less power over us. And here comes Jesus, bouncing into town on a donkey like Porky Pig in a Looney Tunes spoof of Man of La Mancha; actually, two donkeys as it turns out. It's silly, and it's powerful.

The inspiration for this tale seems to be Zechariah, chapter 9 and verse 9. In that passage, the prophet says to Jerusalem that their king will come to them as a liberator, humbly riding a little donkey. The next verse says that he will banish chariots and weapons from the kingdom, thereby establishing peace among the nations.

Matthew doesn't stop with the imagery from Zechariah, he also borrows from 2 Kings, where crowds shout praises for King Jehu while spreading cloaks before him as a sort of red carpet honor. Matthew then borrows from the 118th Psalm, a hymn people would sing while making pilgrimage to the holy city...*Hosanna!* (which means "save us"), *Hosanna — blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!!!*

Matthew takes all of these images from stories in the bible, and he weaves them together and applies them to what was the beginning of the end of Jesus' life, as he enters the holy city for the last time.

Paul did the same thing in the letter he wrote from prison to the Philippians. Paul of course didn't know that we'd be reading his mail, but his letters circulated for centuries before being included in what we now call the bible. Paul wants to not only make sense of Jesus' suffering, but also his own. He's incarcerated for goodness' sake! And so he recalls Isaiah's imagery of a righteous person who suffers and who pours out his life unto death. Paul borrows that imagery and applies it to Jesus' suffering, and he takes comfort from it as he faces his own. (Isaiah 53.12)

Paul also remembers that Isaiah says the suffering servant, the righteous person who is unfairly treated, is held by God, lifted up, exalted. Paul is confident this was true for Jesus; Paul is hopeful this will be true for him. (Isaiah 52.3)

Paul also recalls that Isaiah insisting that in time every knee will bow in reverence to the Holy Mystery we call God. For Paul, Jesus was God's regent, the anointed one, the messiah who ruled

hearts if not homeland. And so, for Paul, Jesus represents the divine presence within and among us, and so he applies Isaiah's words to Jesus' life. (Isaiah 45.23)

Of course, Paul isn't just playing with scripture and theology. He's also making political commentary. Rome has Paul in prison. Rome executed Jesus some three decades earlier. Every knee bows to Caesar; Caesar's name is above every name; Caesar is the emperor, the Ruler above all vassal kings, the Lord above all regional lords. Paul not only applies Isaiah's language to Jesus, he applies Caesar's language to Jesus. Paul summons the temerity to suggest that his God is sovereign of the universe and Jesus was God's regent on earth; and if that wasn't bold enough, Paul then says that the powers that killed Jesus should and ultimately WILL honor him! Caesar will honor the one he killed?!!! Paul is playing with fire here! To call Jesus "Lord" wasn't just piety, it wasn't an affirmation about his metaphysical nature, it was a subversive, revolutionary act that could get you killed.

Rome rules with an iron fist. Rome maintains order through strength, through force of arms, through legions and chariots and weapons, and intimidation. Rome crucifies people to terrify them into compliance, taxes people heavily, destroys enemies without mercy, and calls their domination of Europe and northern Africa, Peace — the Pax Romana. The rulers of the "real" world rule with force and fear.

Another three decades after Paul's letter to the Philippians, Matthew is doing what Paul did; he's remembering lessons from scripture and applying them to Jesus. By the time Matthew is writing, a rebellion against Rome has failed and Jerusalem and its Temple have been destroyed. Matthew isn't in prison, like Paul was, but his land is occupied and his people are oppressed. Rather than calling to mind Isaiah, Matthew brings up Zechariah and his image of a humble, peace-loving hero. He would champion peaceful ideals and he would be humble and just, and he wouldn't use weapons to establish peace but would use peace to abolish weapons. The prophecy never came to pass, but one always hopes.

So here's someone we're calling Matthew, and he is pretending Jerusalem still stands. And he is pretending that Zechariah's prophecy is being fulfilled. And he is imagining Jesus riding into town on a silly donkey, the peaceful hero, the humble messiah. The people cheer him and wave palm branches, shouting that hymn from Psalm 118, Hosanna! ("save us"). Save us from imperial domination. Save us from violence and a culture of fear. Save us from war and cruel punishments. Save us from this empire and establish a more peaceful, more just way of living in the world.

It's literary subversion. It's a critique of the politics of fear and domination. It's a critique of war mongering. It's a call for a political leadership that is humble, and that promotes justice, and that wants peace. Not kings riding the chariots of war, but a peasant carpenter bouncing in on a dumb grey donkey, illustrating that peace and justice are possible. It's a fantasy, of course, but one that that the gospel writers desperately hoped would become a reality.

Religious scholar Carol Christ says, "When the world is suffering, God is diminished. When the world is joyous, God is enhanced." This morning's passage offers an alternative to the suffering caused by empire. This morning's passage offers not only the prayer of "Save us!" but also the hope that such liberation, such salvation is possible. This morning's passage offers us the dream of God being enhanced by the people of God clinging to hope and to joy no matter what.

The one riding on the donkey dreams of a kingdom where the last are first and the first are last. That is a different world from empire. The donkey riding messiah dreams of a world where moral persuasion is used more often than physical force, and where justice is restorative rather than retributive, and where hope and healing are wanted more than violence and vengeance. It's a world where authority based on force is undermined and replaced with peace and goodwill and justice for all - that's the long awaited kingdom of God .

Of course, the people in the Gospel fantasy disperse. They lose interest quickly in the alternative vision. It takes a lot of effort to maintain, and a lot of strength and courage to keep alive. And another crowd will soon be shouting, "crucify him." And then instead of a crowd, there will be just a few loved ones holding each other and crying as they mourn the loss of that brave visionary who was the kind of man who might ride a silly donkey or two into the city of his doom. Of course, that's not the end of the story, but to hear that, you'll have to come back NEXT Sunday.

Until then, I hope that we will use this Holy Week to renew our commitment to follow the peaceful, justice seeking, donkey riding, humble messiah into the courageous vision of a world of peace and justice for all people. I hope as we approach the day of resurrection, we will allow our own hopes and commitment to be resurrected so that the kingdom of God may finally come, on earth as it is in heaven. God save us. Hosanna. Amen.

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AFFIRMATION:

Hosanna!

God is saving me from my fears.

Hosanna!

God is saving me from hopelessness.

Hosanna!

God is saving me from despair.

Hosanna!

God is saving me for a life of joy.

And so it is!

FINAL WORD:

"I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge — myth is more potent than history — dreams are more powerful than facts — hope always triumphs over experience — laughter is the cure for grief — love is stronger than death." — Robert Fulgham