

## Braving the Wilderness *The Donkey is the Point*

John 12:12-16

March 24, 2024

For six weeks, we have been braving the wilderness. We began on a Wednesday night in this space with ashes smeared on our foreheads and a hard truth spoken. *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.* We've faced the temptations. We've encountered the doubts, the fears, and the despair that threaten, always threaten, to overtake us and overwhelm our faith. We've chosen the path of vulnerability—confessing our weakness and trusting in God's mercy. We have learned that the wilderness is not a hospitable home. It has taken courage to walk this road.

But today. Today feels different. Put away the ashes and bring out the branches. Strike up the band. Cue the parade. It must be Palm Sunday. And we have earned it! We've earned this day of celebration, this summons to sing sweet hosannas.

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, and we follow him there. He enters the city at the start of Passover, the streets pulsing, packed with visitors, all in town for the festival. A crowd gathers when they hear that Jesus himself is on his way into the city through the eastern gate. They line the roadside. They roll out the green carpet. They wave their palms, and they shout words they know by heart. Words they learned as children. Words of sacred scripture:

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*

Look at you, Jesus! They call him king, and it is not the first time. Earlier, after Jesus feeds five thousand hungry bodies with five loaves and two fish, John's gospel records a perplexing moment. If we paid attention, our minds return to that moment this morning. The awestruck crowd chases Jesus down, and John writes, "When Jesus realized that they were about to take him by force and make him king, he withdrew to the

mountain by himself." Jesus deflects the attention and retreats to the mountains.

And the scene in the streets of Jerusalem this morning has that same dynamic. It is so crowded that we might be surprised by the gospel writer's singling out a seemingly minor detail. As the multitudes clamor again to coronate Jesus, John shifts his focus from the parade and the palms to a pack animal, a beast of burden. This moment, it seems, is not about the festival or the crowd. It is a day for donkeys.

Quietly, Jesus slips away to find a young donkey. He awkwardly climbs onto its back. In case we were unaware, John reminds us that this is how the prophet Zechariah had predicted the Messiah would come: "triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey."

John then tells us that the disciples did not understand these things. Who could? Not now. It was only later that they realized the meaning. *Your king is coming—humble and riding on a donkey.*

What *did* it mean? What was Jesus claiming with this deliberate decision, this provocative action, this retreating from the clamor of the crowd to find a donkey?

The crowds at the Passover festival thought they knew what he was doing, that an uprising had begun. When they saw Jesus enter the eastern gate, they thought they had found their knight in shining armor. Their long-awaited Messiah. An even more powerful version of King David. Conquering hero.

The word they shout is the same one you've been singing this morning: *Hosanna*. It is a Hebrew expression. *Save us. Save us.*

That is what they cried, and it is what they hoped.  
*Save us. Wrestle the throne away from the puppet king  
 Herod Antipas. Take on Emperor Tiberius. Establish  
 your kingdom on earth. Save us, Jesus! Save us.* They  
 want the parade to shift to righteous insurrection. They  
 are convinced Jesus is with them. They've been in the  
 wilderness so long, but today...today feels different.  
*Today, victory is ours. Power is ours.*

Imagine the scene as it could have unfolded. Jesus  
 rides to the palace where he and the masses following  
 him take control by force. A little bloodshed maybe, but  
 then it's all in the name of victory. It is the way we might  
 write the scene. If we're honest, even now, it is what  
 we hope. It was the great preacher Fred Craddock who  
 suggested, "Many people are obsessed with the second  
 coming [of Christ] because, deep down, they were  
 disappointed with the first one."

*Save us! And do it our way.* We are all prone to this kind  
 of projection. We assume we can know who God is by  
 looking at ourselves and then making it all bigger. By  
 looking at ourselves and making our qualities stronger  
 and more powerful. *We are vengeful, so God is vengeful.  
 We want to destroy our enemies, so God wants to destroy  
 our enemies.* What we are tempted to see today is the  
 powerful king come to take power back...and give it us.  
 But here's the truth. We cannot be saved by a God who  
 is just like us only bigger, with more lightning bolts and  
 warrior angels.

No, violence in the streets is not how this parade will  
 end. If we want to know who God is, we must look not at  
 ourselves but at Jesus.

The king is riding a donkey. And the donkey is the point.

Of course, the disciples did not understand, and the  
 truth is, many still don't. There is a tragic irony in the  
 attempt of some in our time to mix state power with  
 Christian faith. It is blasphemy. I've heard pastors who  
 have been denounced by members of their churches  
 for speaking of love for enemies or the virtue of humility.  
 Never mind that these lessons are drawn explicitly from  
 the life of Jesus.

These pastors are told that such messages have no  
 place in *this* moment. That today, Christians must be  
 prepared to fight, to take over political and cultural  
 institutions, to exclude others and consolidate power.  
*Jesus, ride that donkey right into the palace and take the  
 throne. Sacrifice and servanthood are no longer options.  
 Not now. We need that throne. We need the kingdom, the  
 power, and the glory for us.*

But what if the donkey is the point? What if the kids who  
 describe this Sunday as "Donkey Day" are exactly right?

They tried to take him and make him king by force.  
 He retreated to the mountain. They called him king;  
 he found a donkey. You see, it is a parody of the grand  
 procession of the emperor. The parade is a parable.  
 The starring role belongs to the humble donkey, often  
 disregarded and mocked.

I love Mary Oliver's poem, "The Poet Thinks about the  
 Donkey." She writes,

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 the 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>i</sup>

Where does true power lie? Who will rescue us? Who will save us from ourselves? These are the questions that confront us this Palm Sunday, and they will be our constant companions throughout the week ahead. Dare I say for months to come?

As we travel beyond the beauty of this Palm Sunday to crueler days of struggle this week, we will meet the true, saving power of Jesus. We will meet it in unexpected places previously reserved for grief and punishment. Today, that place is the back of a donkey. Oh, there will be violence this week, but it will not be righteous. There will be displays of brute force, but they will not bear witness to God's will. Soon we turn to stories of suffering caused by those who worship power, and we should pay attention. We should pray for courage.

The crowd wants to crown Jesus, but he knows a deeper power at work—a love so strong it needs no army, no stockpile of weapons, no appeals to violence. If you want to see God's power this week, you will have to climb a hill called Calvary. If you want to know the power of God, you will have to stare up at the image of God's Son hanging from an old rugged cross. You will have to hear him forgive the very ones who crucify him. That is where power lies. Nothing else can save us.

The disciples did not understand, not until later, and I find hope in that. They needed the whole story. So do not try to understand it all today. Go ahead. Join the procession. Wave the palms. Clear the way for the one whose power redefines what the word means. But for God's sake, keep your eyes on Jesus.

He's riding a little donkey into the holy city. And the donkey is the point. Ride on, King Jesus. Ride on in your majesty and in your humility. Overturn our expectations. Change our hearts. Save us. Save us. Save us. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Mary Oliver, "The Poet Thinks about the Donkey," in *Thirst*, Beacon Press, 2006.