

The Donkey's Perspective – March 28, 2021 – Palm Sunday

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One of the main characters in our Palm Sunday journey doesn't typically get a lot of press. We hear about Jesus, and the disciples, and the fellow pilgrims who are traveling with them on the dusty road to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. But there's one important fellow who is usually overlooked. We don't give much attention to his role, except in a cursory sort of way. I'm referring of course to the colt, the young donkey, the poor little beast that was dragged oh-so-unceremoniously into this spontaneous parade without a second thought.

We don't get to hear much commentary in Mark's version of the story. We only hear the instructions Jesus gives to a pair of his disciples, to run ahead to the next village, where they'll find a colt tied near the entrance. They're told to untie him and bring him to Jesus and what to say if anyone tries to stop them. Of course, no one asked the donkey's opinion on the matter.

The donkey is perfectly content where he is. He must be Presbyterian, because he likes things done "decently and in order." He's not big on change. He is comfortable with his routine. As long as food and water and rest come at regular intervals, he's happy to do his work, day in and day out. He is a beast of burden, after all. He knows his place in the social structure, and he's content to remain there. He's a bit conventional in his thinking. Adventure is a word he doesn't understand.

On this particular day, as usual at this time, the donkey finds himself tied up at a residence near the edge of the village, close to the main road, and he's munching on some hay. He's noticed a great deal more traffic lately – strangers passing through the village. Folks from the countryside staying in town overnight, outsiders making their way along the road, all heading in the same direction. Had the beast been a bit older, he would have realized that this was an annual occurrence. These pilgrims come through every year on their way to the big city for some festival up there.

The donkey tries to ignore the various distractions and extra noise caused by this increased traffic, but he can't help but notice a pair of scruffy men drawing closer to him on this lazy afternoon. He slows his chewing a bit to concentrate on the pair. They look strange and smell funny. And now they are coming into his personal space, in fact, way too close for comfort. He tries to ignore them, but then he feels a hand on his bridle, and he bristles.

And they begin to untie him. Wait. What are they doing? He stamps his feet in irritation, but the men continue. True to his genetic makeup, he tries to resist. He's a donkey, after all. Stubbornness and reluctance to change are in his blood. He doesn't want to try anything new and he doesn't trust these mangy outsiders. He has his routines, he has his little niche in society, and he certainly doesn't want to be dragged into someone else's crusade. Jumping out on faith? Come on. That's for those folks who seem to have nothing better to do than get involved with the latest cause. They should learn to mind their own business.

Try as he might, the colt isn't experienced enough to resist for long. His stubbornness is as yet underdeveloped, and the two scruffy men quickly wear him down. But the struggle does not go unnoticed. When he finally gives in and decides to go wherever they are taking him, some locals try

to save him. He is encouraged by this, snorting with relief – after all, the home town folks need to stick together against these outsiders. The men talk together for a bit. He relaxes and eyes his hay with anticipation. But then the strangers begin to lead him away. But wait! I promise I won't nip at the missus anymore when she turns her back to me. I promise to do my work without arguing! Don't let them take me! I'm a minor!

The colt is led down the road away from the village, and he begins to settle down, resigned to his fate, whatever it might be. You can't fight the people who hold the rope, after all. Along the way he listens as the two men went on and on, talking about some fellow named Jesus. He seems important, as they spoke highly of him and the amazing things he could do. According to them things were gonna change around here, now that Jesus was on the scene. Hopefully that included no more donkey thievery!

After a short time the men lead the colt toward a group of people. They seem very excited about something. Some took off their cloaks and start to put them on the colt's backside. The donkey is miffed. His backside is perfectly fine the way it is, and he does not appreciate them dressing him up, thank you very much! He thinks to himself, I didn't allow these fellows to bring me to this Jesus person in order to be changed. They said he was kind and compassionate, so I expected to be made comfortable. I figured he would praise me and tell me what I fine donkey I was – appreciating me for who I am, not expecting me to change into something else. But the man just stands there, silently looking at me, allowing these others to pile their clothes on me.

Then Jesus mounts the donkey, and the beast freezes in place. Shocked by this turn of events. He's never been ridden before. That is a job for horses; they were enthusiastic and bold. Fanatical in some ways, always prancing about, eager to please and show off. He is certainly not a horse. Furthermore, if this man is so important, why would he want to ride on a donkey? Then the colt remembers hearing talk around the village. Some of the older, wiser donkeys liked to share tales with the youngsters. They told him that sometimes a great king would take a donkey as his steed. No one else but the king could ever ride him. Now, generally kings rode horses. But occasionally, during a time of great peace, a king would take as his steed a fine donkey. Of course, the colt thought they were just yanking his tail. Besides, this dusty fellow was anything but a king.

The colt grew more indignant. There he was minding his own business back in the village. It was bad enough to be stolen by these hooligans. But he didn't come along to cart this Jesus fellow around. Meeting him was one thing, but being his servant? He never agreed to that. What would the others say if they saw him acting like a horse? How embarrassing.

As they walk up the road, the crowd around him begins cheering and singing. They are waving their arms and laughing and dancing with one another. Others bring branches and begin tossing them onto the road in front of him, making a soft cushion under his hooves. The donkey lifts his head just a bit. He wonders if all this praise was for him? The more he thinks about it, he decides he enjoys this recognition. Look at me, he thinks. And why shouldn't they cheer, I am after all, a Jesus-carrying donkey. Apparently this is a big deal. What a unique and special colt I am!

The man on his back pats his neck gently, as if in thanks and appreciation for this service. The donkey feels a little ashamed. He is being foolish, a silly colt. He plods onward, lost in his donkey thoughts. As they near the city, the cheering crowds around them begin to disperse. It seems a little strange. He thought they would go on into the city and cause an even bigger ruckus. He doesn't understand humans very well, but he senses a change in the mood. The man on his back is somber and quiet. His friends seem nervous and the donkey can smell fear, as if they sensed a predator was near. How odd?

After a while, the quiet man finally dismounts. He gazes deeply into the colt's eyes, and again pats him gently on the neck. The people carefully remove their cloaks from his back. He feels a brief coolness as the breeze touches his sweat-covered back. He snorts and tosses his head. The gentle man reaches a hand into a small bag in his cloak and pulls out a handful of grain. The donkey nibbles gently at the outstretched hand, being very careful to not bite flesh.

Then the quiet man instructs the pair of scruffy men to return the colt to the village. The sky is darkening. It is growing late. Before they lead him away, the colt curiously watches as the gentle man methodically climbs the steps into the large, stone edifice before him. The donkey's animal instincts pick up a familiar sensation. The man Jesus marches forward with a determination bordering on stubbornness. How does the colt know this? Well, he is a donkey after all. He knows tenacity when he sees it.

Throughout Holy Week we will observe many people who are first drawn to Jesus, but then will resist him, try to change him, seek privilege from being with him, or even condemn him. Those crowds who cheered him on his way will soon be screaming for his death. Religious folks plot to kill him. Most of his closest companions run away in order to save their own skins. They couldn't handle how the story was ending. Even brash Peter will only shamefully deny him. In the end, a man named Simon of Cyrene was willing to be a faithful donkey and help him carry the cross. In the end, it was only a few brave women and the disciple John who would stand with him, willing to witness the violence that was inflicted upon one they so loved. And only Joseph of Arimathea was willing to offer a tomb for his burial.

Later this week, we will be confronted with a dead man in a borrowed tomb. There is no Easter joy in today's message. Nor will you find any all week. Until we dare to enter the reality of evil and death, willing to carry Jesus on our backs to the tomb, we cannot hope to begin to know the incredible power of the Resurrection.