

We are faced today with the strange, ironic juxtaposition of two objects: rocks that cry out and a brave donkey that doesn't. Luke must be a magic man, living in a world of metaphysical wonders to be able to say the things he says. Jesus is on his way into Jerusalem, a city that would have been packed with wall-to-wall people. They have come from near and far for the festival of the Passover. They have been doing it this way for hundreds and hundreds of years now. At Passover every year they gather in Jerusalem, or if not in Jerusalem then in their own villages and towns and cities, with everyone in the family and every Jew around, to commemorate the day when God said to Moses, “It's time for my people to leave behind their slave quarters in Egypt once and for all. They were not meant to live like this. You will lead them out to a better land, a free land.” Of course, this set off the power struggle to end all power struggles between Moses and Pharaoh, Pharaoh who not near as ready as God was to let the people go. When Pharaoh had finally had enough to say, “Alright, take them and get out,” Moses told the people to waste no time. “Tonight, the Lord will pass over and strike down everything that stands in our way. Stuff whatever you can in your bags, take the half-baked bread out of the oven. It's our time to go.”

Fast forward those hundreds and hundreds of years and those same people are now living in the land of the free but they are not free. A new Pharaoh has come along, not Egyptian but Roman. Amazingly enough, the people still haven't lost their luster, their hope of one day getting what's coming to them. They've come to Jerusalem, as they've done every year, to gather their spirits, to celebrate their common heritage. They'll get around their tables and eat another loaf of half-baked bread, their reminder that all is not finished, their story is not complete yet, God is still working out their salvation for them.

According to Luke, though, something is stirring different in Jerusalem this year. There's a prophet, a miracle-worker who's been going around. He seems to have the will of the people on his side, and he's on his way into the city in parade-like fashion.

Now it would be easy for us to think that this is Thanksgiving Day in America. That the half-baked bread is just our version of turkey and Jesus is coming down Main Street Jerusalem on a float, with a mic in hand, while he belts out his latest hit single. Or that this

is Veteran's Day, and pretty soon we can expect to see the flag rounding the corner, with a procession of armored tanks in tow. Only instead Jesus comes in to Jerusalem on a donkey, a donkey that doesn't appear to make a single sound. Have you ever met such a donkey? I surely haven't. And there are no tanks, no uniformed soldiers, no flags waving; just a bunch of gangly palm branches that at the last second the people cut down. It's a site so pathetic and paltry that you have to wonder why Luke bothered to describe it at all. They must have been anticipating someone who could at least match, if not best, Rome's power. They shout, "Blessed is the King!" But look at the king they are getting! Luke and Matthew, in their description of the parade, have the people shouting, "Hosanna! Hosanna!" which is a phrase of adoration and praise, but what's to praise?

The combination of a king riding in a parade on a donkey to people shouting Hosanna and waving palm branches is so absurd that there can only be one of two explanations for it. Either the people think Jesus is going to get off that donkey pretty soon and start to take his role seriously, or they don't understand Jesus at all. Of course, there's also a third possibility (there's always a third possibility), which is that the people understand perfectly who Jesus is and what is truly praiseworthy in the world. Humbleness, compassion, the refusal to play power games, the persistence to stand up for the disadvantaged and the weak. To take joy in another person simply because they share your humanity. To take love where love has yet to go. This is praise.

In 1988 Orel Hershiser pitched an unbelievable season of baseball for the Los Angeles Dodgers. In the final game of the playoffs he pitched a complete game shut-out and ended the season earning two Most Valuable Player awards, including one for winning the World Series. In one of the final games of the playoffs, the TV cameras zoomed in and caught Orel in the dugout between innings softly singing to himself. Unable to make out the tune, the announcers simply noted that Orel's game had certainly given him something to sing about. Sometime later, he appeared on the *Tonight Show* where host, Johnny Carson, coaxed him into singing whatever it was that he'd been singing in the dugout that day. Thought reluctant, Orel Hershiser sang before a live national audience:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow

Praise God all creatures here below

Praise God above ye heavenly host

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Luke says that in Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday the crowds praised God joyfully, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” And when the religious teachers heard it they tried to shut up the crowds. Maybe they didn’t think it was appropriate to speak of donkeys and Jesus as praiseworthy. Maybe *they* didn’t understand what Jesus was up to.

One of my favorite poets has become Mary Oliver, who reflects on the meaning of Palm Sunday in her poem called, “The Poet Thinks about the Donkey.”

On the outskirts of Jerusalem
the donkey waited.
Not especially brave, or filled with understanding,
he stood and waited.

*How horses, turned out in the meadow,
leap with delight!*
*How doves, released from the 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 him.

Never had he seen such crowds!
And I wonder if the donkey 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.¹

¹ From her book, Thirst, p. 44.

As I consider this poem I am struck by two images especially. The first is of the donkey being led away and the other is of the donkey stepping, as he had to, forward. I am quite certain the donkey did not know he was being led away to carry a king. I am quite certain the donkey did not know that the king had already decided in his heart and mind not to take the path of other kings, but to walk a much harder path to glory. I am quite certain the donkey did not know he would need to be brave. But like Jesus himself, being led away from what he wanted, to do what God wanted, the donkey stepped, as he had to, forward. Into an unknown future, with only the hope of unfailing love, he stepped, as he had, forward.

And now I think of all the people who know what it is to step forward into the unknown. I think of you. You who spend years caring for a sick loved one, a loved one you can't imagine life without, you pray again and again, and then the day comes, the diagnosis is fatal, the end is near, and you step, as you have to, forward.

You wait for a new job to come your way. You look and look, the day of the interview arrives, it goes well, but you don't get the job...again. And you step, as you have to, forward.

Your marriage is on the rocks; your teenage son is into the wrong things; your addiction is eating you alive, hard decisions must be made but you'd rather not make them because it would be easier not to, and you step, as you have to, forward. Then there are our children, who must be not only the donkey stepping forward but also the rocks crying out. Crying out and stepping out to march all over our country yesterday, because when lives are being lost, we may just have to choose between our rights and what is right.

Agnes Norfleet points out that what Jesus was doing that day he rode through the crowds weeping over Jerusalem was "stepping into our lives, into the things we face, into our own suffering, into our cries for peace."²

Jewish Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes that "redemption is not to be conceived solely as an act that will come about all at once and without preparation. [Redemption] is an ongoing, continuous process in which all have a role to play, either [slowing down] or

² Norfleet, Agnes. From her sermon, "A Palm Sunday Sermon," in the *Journal for Preachers*," Vol. XXXII, Num. 3, p. 24.

[moving along] the process. Not only is redemption a necessity for [human being], [human beings] are a necessity to redemption. Our actions are vital and affect the course of redemption and what happens next because we hold the key that can unlock the chains that bind the redeemer.”

What is the key? Some say it is greater military might or better foreign policy or tighter trade policies, but I believe the key to redemption lies in the shouting of rocks and the quiet bravery of a donkey.

Mary Oliver ends her poem hoping that the donkey who strode into Jerusalem that day finally felt brave, and that he loved the man who rode so lightly upon him, as he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped, as he had to, forward. I pray that for the love of God and God’s world, we do too. Amen.