

## THE POET THINKS ABOUT THE DONKEY

Matthew 21:1-11

*A homily given by Larry R. Hayward on April 9, 2017, Palm Sunday, at the 8:30 a.m. service at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

### **Matthew 21:1-11**

*When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, “The Lord needs them.” And he will send them immediately.’*

*This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,*

*‘Tell the daughter of Zion,  
Look, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’*

*The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,*

*‘Hosanna to the Son of David!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!’*

*When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’ The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’*

### I.

Today is traditionally known as Palm Sunday, the day in which Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and was greeted by crowds waving palm branches<sup>1</sup> and cheering:

*“Hosanna to the Son of David!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”<sup>2</sup>*

With this procession begins Holy Week, which, after several days of teaching and heightening conflict, will turn to the even more *solemn* events of Thursday:

- Jesus’ betrayal by Judas
- The Passover meal Jesus eats with his disciples that becomes his *Last* Supper and our *Lord’s* Supper
- His struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane “Let this cup pass from me...”
- The “kiss of death” leading to Jesus’ arrest
- His trial before the High Priest

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<sup>1</sup> John 12:13.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 118:25a.

- His being denied by Peter three times before the cock crows.

All occurring on Thursday of this coming week, followed by the *more deadly* events of Friday:

- Jesus' trial before Pilate
- The suicide of Judas
- Pilate's question before the crowd: "Whom do you want me to release?"
- The crowd shouting "Barabbas"
- Pilate asking: "Then what do you want me to do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?"
- The crowd again shouting: "Let him be crucified! Let him be crucified!"
- Pilate washing his hands of the whole controversy.

Then

- Soldiers mocking Jesus
- Simon of Cyrene carrying Jesus' cross to a place called "The Place of a Skull"
- Wine mixed with gall
- Soldiers casting lots to divide his clothes among them
- Passersby wagging their heads: "If you are the Son of God, come down off the cross"
- Thieves crucified with him taunting him with the same words
- Jesus' final words: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
- Sour wine on a sponge on a stick
- His last breath
- The temple of the curtain torn in two
- The earth shaking
- Rocks splitting
- Tombs opening – the dead rising and appearing
- The bodies of saints who had fallen asleep being raised
- Then the centurion on duty: "Truly this man was God's Son!"
- Then the quiet work of Joseph of Arimathea:
  - Removing the body from the cross
  - Wrapping it in a clean, linen cloth
  - Placing it in a new tomb
  - Rolling a stone across the opening of the tomb
- And the next day, Saturday: Pilate granting permission for guards to make the tomb secure by sealing its stone.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The above narration follows Matthew 21:12-27:66.

All this happens between the time we leave this service and the time we gather next Sunday to sing:

*The strife is o'er, the battle done;  
The victory of life is won;  
The song of triumph has begun: Alleluia!*<sup>4</sup>

It is a very important week in the life of the church.

## II.

In all four Gospels, the narrative of the first three years of Jesus' life and teaching moves at a brisk pace – parables here, miracles there, healings everywhere – until this week, Holy Week, when the Gospel writers *slow* the pace down and lead us to see *detail* after *detail*, *drama* after *drama*. Not so much blood and gore as human drama, human action, human failure and human heroism.

But as important as the events of Holy Week are, it is the *resurrection* of next Sunday morning that makes these events both *newsworthy* and *historic*. As the Apostle Paul writes:

*If there is no resurrection of the dead,  
Then Christ has not been raised;*

*And if Christ has not been raised,  
Then our proclamation has been in vain*

*And your faith has been in vain.*<sup>5</sup>

It is the resurrection of Christ that makes his teaching *beyond* that of a great teacher, his death *beyond* that of a martyr, his life *beyond* that of other great lives, both those lived to their fullness of days and those cut short by human conflict and violence. And it all begins with a procession into Jerusalem on a donkey, to the waving of branches and shouts of “Hosanna!”

## III.

For over 2000 years, the arts have played a significant role in walking us through the events of Holy Week. To begin our walk this year, I want to turn not to paintings we can see in the world's finest museums or music we can hear in cathedrals or concert halls.

I want to begin our focus on Holy Week with a *poem* that tells a story and thus sounds more like a parable or fable or even children's story than what we typically consider a poem to be. The poem is by Mary Oliver, a contemporary American poet. Its title provides all the introduction it needs to set the stage and invite us in. The title: “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.*

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<sup>4</sup> “The Strife Is O’er,” Hymn 119 in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*.

<sup>5</sup> I Corinthians 15:13-14.

*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>6</sup>*

While this poem is entitled “The Poet Thinks About the Donkey,” it is clear that as Mary Oliver thinks about the *donkey*, she is thinking about *herself*: her own insignificance as one human being in all of creation, perhaps her own reticence to act with courage, perhaps her own faith and the doubts that surround it. As we hear the poem and are lead to think about the donkey, we too cannot help but think about ourselves: “small, dark, obedient.”

#### IV.

The poem leads us first to think of what we are not: “Not especially brave, or filled with understanding.”

- Even in this city of privilege and power, even in this congregation that is so efficient and put together, even in this community where children have near unlimited opportunities to explore the furthest limits of the heavens or the deepest intricacies of the earth, most of us do not feel like “horses...leaping with delight” nor “doves...splashed with sunlight.” Where we are – or at least where we often feel – is “on the outskirts” – of the city in which we live, the firm in which we work, the friends with whom we socialize, the family with whom we were once so close, the church in which we worship. Or if we are young, we may feel – at least at times – on the outskirts of the school in which we study, the team on which we play, the friends we thought we had. Like the donkey, we are on the outskirts, of Jerusalem, of Alexandria, of those around us.
- We may even feel “on the outskirts” of our own lives, our best selves. Detached from our own bodies, sighing and sleeping, or never able to sleep, *wondering about* and *wandering into* the future, doing what we have always done but doing it with less passion, less focus, less joy. We are on the outskirts of our best selves.
- Neither are we “especially brave, or filled with understanding,” so, like the donkey, we do a lot of “standing and waiting.” Waiting for the next *event* that might change our lives, the next *person*, the next *relationship*, the next *thrill* or *excitement* or *toy* or *trip* or *Apple release* or *driverless car*, the next *celebrity murder mystery* or *mayhem* or *challenge* or *crisis* simply to relieve our boredom and keep us from dwelling too long on the reality that we are “Not especially brave or filled with understanding.”

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<sup>6</sup> Available at <http://yearsrisingmaryoliver.blogspot.com/2010/10/poet-thinks-about-donkey-october-4-2010.html>.

Thus, we find ourselves “tied to a tree, as usual,” within view of horses “leaping with delight” and doves “splashed in sunlight,” neither of which we can come close to doing.

But *then* someone comes along and asks if he can untie us from the tree. We say yes. And he asks us to follow. For some reason we think there might be something to this invitation, something good, perhaps something different than our usual standing and waiting, perhaps something like redemption, though that is not a concept to which we have given much thought nor a word we often use. So we allow ourselves “to be led away” and we are led to a stranger who asks if he may ride on our back, and for some reason we “let the stranger mount.”

After several miles of bearing the stranger, we come upon a bustling of people. We have never “seen such crowds!” We have no idea why they have gathered, what they are about, and we cannot imagine “what [is about] to happen.”

But something, something, leads us to ride on. We ride on, not yet “in majesty,” but ride on we do. It is not so much curiosity that leads us to ride on, or the *excitement* and *incitement* that can come with a crowd. Perhaps it is the stranger himself, the one who rides “so lightly” upon us.

So we lift *one dusty hoof*. And we step...as we have to...forward. And then we step again, and again. Lifting. Looking. Stepping. Stopping and pausing to be sure. But *forward* each time, *forward, one hoof at a time*.

We do feel as we *have* to walk, *have* to bear the stranger upon us, but the feeling is not the kind of *have to* we have known before, the kind of *have to* that comes with *boredom*, or *routine*, or *parental expectations* or the *threat of force* or even *the threat of law*... It is not an unpleasant *have to*, but one in which we simply *cannot say no* to the one who rides lightly upon us, the one we grow, with each step, increasingly to love.

It is a love unlike any other love we have felt or known. A love that leads us to feel something else we’ve never felt before: bravery. As we see the crowd, we hesitate, but we feel brave.

We sense  
It may get nasty, ugly, violent.  
There are a lot of people up ahead,  
Waving and shouting “Hosanna,”  
But you know how people are,  
How they can turn on a dime  
And turn on you.

But this feeling of bravery  
While as new to us  
As the first breathe we took  
Out of our mother’s womb,  
Leaves us so much less afraid than we’ve been before.  
Less afraid of the demons we must confront,  
Within ourselves,  
Within our families,  
Within our nation or culture  
Our vocation or faith.  
Less afraid of failure.  
We feel less afraid to take the first step,  
To speak up,  
To say how we feel,  
We are so much less afraid to confront someone,

Someone we love,  
Someone for whom we work,  
Someone for whom we are responsible.  
We are less afraid  
To put ourselves in harm's way,  
To blow the whistle,  
To resist,  
To affirm,  
To defend.

So we step forward,  
One hoof at a time,  
Trusting  
That our bravery  
Will be borne  
By the one we bear on our back,  
The one whose legs are draped over our rib cage,  
The one who rides  
Lightly,  
Ever so lightly.

Amen.