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Mark 11:1-11
 Isaiah 50:4-9a
 Psalm 31:9-16
 Philippians 2:5-11
 Mark 14:1-15:47

March 28, 2021

Palm Sunday

The Poet Thinks About the Donkey

By Mary Oliver

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, 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.

We begin this morning with a donkey. Or, the colt of a donkey depending on which Gospel account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem you may read. I couldn't get Mary Oliver's beautiful words out of my mind this week. It's a perspective we often don't think about on Palm Sunday. We tend to focus on the crowds surrounding Jesus or the disciples. We might focus on Jesus himself and the dangerous journey he is embarking upon. We might even envision the Roman soldiers entering the city by another gate.

But the unassuming donkey?

Let me set the stage. I want you to imagine the walk from the Mount of Olives to the walls of Jerusalem. It's about the distance from one hill top at the State Farm to the next hilltop on Route 6 as you come into Goochland. It's not far. And, as you approach the outer walls you

would most certainly hear the growing noise of city life...the busy markets, children playing in the courtyards, women doing laundry and cooking from the rooftops, carts being pulled down cobblestone paths. You might hear the blow of horns as Roman soldiers arrive at the opposite city gates. You would most certainly see hundreds of pilgrims arriving for Passover, filling narrow alley ways with excitement and reverence and awe at simply being in Jerusalem.

It's hot and dusty. The air is thick with sweat and songs and prayers and laughter.

And the donkey approaches the commotion carefully stepping one foot in front of another. He had been waiting so patiently, for what he knew not but he waited nonetheless tied to that tree. Suddenly, someone came up beside him and lead him away. He trusted the man and followed beside him without much resistance. It must have been scary for that little animal, moving into the unknown, not knowing where he was going. But he went anyway, one hoof in front of the other.

And then, imagine Jesus approaching him and looking kindly into his eyes and rubbing his ears. Thank you, he whispers. The donkey lowers his head slightly to receive this beautiful blessing of gratitude. And together they move down the hill and enter the gates of Jerusalem. It's hard for the donkey to see around him. There are so many people and palm branches waving in his face. He bumps into the stone walls and tries to make his way. The noise grows louder and the donkey grows braver. As he journey's with Jesus, he holds his head up higher and walks forward.

I am in awe of this little donkey. I am in awe of his courage when the time came to step forward and follow Jesus. This year in particular this little donkey has made me consider what we have to learn from his humble trust and his resolute determination. What does his journey have to tell us about our own character and our capacity to journey into unknown territory with Jesus as our guide?

Palm Sunday is woven into the fabric of Holy Week as the beginning of a journey...a journey to some of the darkest places our faith could possibly take us and to highest of highs with grand promises and celebrations of resurrection and redemption. It challenges us to consider...would we make the journey if given the chance?

I hope we would be like the donkey, receptive and trusting, willing to say yes to Jesus.

When we say yes to following Jesus, to starting the journey through Holy Week and to the cross, we are saying yes to a Savior who loves us deeply and who wants us to receive the incredible gift of redemption through Him. The journey may at times be difficult. It may be scary and it might push us in ways we didn't anticipate. But, Jesus says, come with me. Let me lead you.

All we have to do is follow. Amen.