

APRIL 10, 2022

When God Needs a Donkey

Luke 19:28-40

Note: Some NT scholars insist that Jesus was not riding a donkey, but I'm going with the donkey because the comedic theme from Bakhtin is so crucial to my sermon.

What's that barn yard animal Jesus is riding? My Lord, it's a, it's a donkey. Kings don't ride donkeys, they ride white stallions, but our King, King Jesus, is riding on a donkey. Do you know that the donkey is ubiquitous in the biblical account of our salvation? The donkey is in more scenes in the biblical drama than the donkey in *Shrek*.

In the barn animal pecking order, maybe the donkey is the lowest of the low, the least of the least. Old McDonald didn't even have a donkey on his farm. But Yankee Doodle Dandy did. If you ever are tempted to believe that somehow you don't count, I want to put that illusion to an end. When Jesus says that greatest comes from being the least, the last, the foolish, the people of no standing, no status, and no wealth, I need you to know that he means every word of it. This is the essence of the kingdom of God. But this is not the way it is in our world. There are a group of wealthy men at the Space Station today who paid \$55,000,000 each to go to space. Now, that's an airline ticket. That's the new symbol of wealth and power in our world. Billionaires take rockets to space; Jesus rides on a donkey.

Television evangelist Jesse Duplantis asked his followers to give him \$54 million for a jet. He defended this decision: "I really believe that if Jesus was physically on the earth today, he wouldn't be riding a donkey...He'd be in an airplane preaching the gospel all over the world." Kenneth Copeland said that he required a private fleet of jets because he couldn't do God's work on a commercial flight. Too many interruptions from people drinking alcohol and taking drugs. I'm tempted to ask, "Where's my jet?", but you would only show me the door.

Have you noticed that a donkey was there for several events that are essential to our salvation? Do you think donkey is just a prop to the story? I think our salvation is tied up in this visual metaphor of the least of the animals in the kingdom of God – the humble donkey.

Perhaps you have seen the movie *Shrek*? And *Shrek 2* and *Shrek the Third* and *Shrek Forever After*? If you've seen *Shrek* you couldn't have missed Donkey. Played by Eddie Murphy, Donkey is a pain in the brain for Shrek. He is a delightful, obnoxious, fast-talking, nonstop chattering bundle of Donkiness. I know that's not a real word, but I think it fits.

When it comes to comedy, as soon as you see a donkey you want to laugh. And when the Donkey speaks and sings and dances, comedy breaks out all over the place. And it turns out that Donkey is essential to the successful ventures of Shrek. It's a love story. It's a miracle story. Donkey ends up married to a fire-breathing dragon.

There's a scene in *Shrek* where the donkey says, "She picked me." No one ever picked the donkey.

Early in our salvation drama, we meet a donkey carrying the wood for the burnt offering and young Isaac, the son of promise to the mountain. "So, Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him."

Isaac, the child of hope, is riding a donkey. And he keeps asking, "Are we there yet?" All the promises of God were riding on that donkey's back. Precious cargo. Remember the story? God told Sarah she would have a son and their offspring would be as the sands of the sea, that they would give birth to nations. Sarah, incredulous, and who wouldn't be at her age, laughed how loud in the face of God. Then suddenly, miracle of miracles, Isaac was born, a miracle child. Through Isaac there would be a multitude of descendants. Listen, Isaac was more than an only child.

But the donkey also carries the wood for the burnt offering and the son of sacrifice, Isaac. This makes no sense. God tells Abram, "Kill the boy. Kill him off." Of all things, Abram obeys God. Then, of all things, at the moment of execution, there's a stay written in the blood of a ram with his horns caught in a bush. Well, as Christians we can't help but think of another Lamb, "Lamb of God." What amazing love. Lamb on the cross, then Lamb on the throne.

Now, see the donkey carrying Isaac away from the place of sacrifice. The wood for the burnt offering has been used up, but Isaac, miracle child, child of promise, child alive, is going to be the start of a multitude of nations. You go, donkey! You get that boy safely back home to his mother. You go donkey! You are something. Don't let anyone tell you differently. You matter!

Fast forward to a much later era and there's a bush burning in the wilderness, and there's Moses staring flat-eyed, scared to death. Now, as the bush burns, God speaks. "Go back to Egypt, Moses. Go, Moses and tell Pharaoh to let my people go."

Look again and what do we see? Moses takes his wife and his sons, puts them on a donkey, and back to the land of Egypt. The contest with Pharaoh on the horizon and there's the donkey. The salvation story of the world on his back once again, but donkey is up to the task. Ears pinned back; donkey bears precious cargo to Egypt. Moses, with the rod of God, will undo all the power of Pharaoh, leaving his chariots on the bottom of the sea.

No donkey is more famous than Balaam's donkey in Numbers 22. This is sheer comedy. Balak, king of Moab, employs Balaam to curse the Israelites. Now Balaam was riding on the donkey. The donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand; so the donkey turned off the road, and went into the field; and Balaam struck the donkey, to turn it back on to the road. Balaam, the seer of visions, the spokesperson of God, doesn't see the angel in the road with sword drawn. The donkey sees. The donkey speaks. A talking donkey. High comedy.

Three times Balaam attempts to put a curse on the Israelites and each time out comes a blessing instead. How amazing when we want to curse but God intends to bless. Turns

out that sometimes it takes a donkey to convince us we must know that we should only speak what the Lord insists that we speak.

Now, Jesus rides a donkey into Jerusalem. This is the act that matters. This is prelude to the cross. Luke tells us that Jesus gave an order to two of his disciples: "Go into the village and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with them; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." God has need of a donkey. Do you see? The lowest of the low, the least of the least? Needed by God and if needed by God, loved by God. No wonder St. Paul later writes, "Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God has need of you and God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is low and despised in the world." A donkey.

Sometimes God needs a donkey.

The great American novelist, Zora Neale Hurston called southern Black women the mules of the world; they did whatever needed doing. African American women did most of the early organizing work in the Civil Rights movement because the men would lose their jobs if they were actively involved. Hurston meant "mules" as a high compliment.

Now, with a little help from a philosopher and literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, I want to pull together the pictures we have been looking through together. Bakhtin did a study of the carnival, what he calls the comedic frame, in the Medieval Age. In the Middle Ages, the church had a liturgy called "the feast of fools." The priest would mount a donkey, riding backward through the town. The people would unleash all the profanities they had saved up at the priest. It was a parody. I am going to suggest that Jesus' act of riding into Jerusalem on a donkey is the biblical equivalent to the carnival spirit. Jesus on the donkey coming through the sheep gate qualifies as parody. The sheep gate was a small back gate used to bring the sheep for sacrifice in the Temple into the city. The sheep gate was low not high. It was a back entrance not the front door. Jesus comes through the back door "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter."

It's a denigrating of everything that smacks of power and wealth and status in Jerusalem – Roman military power, Roman political power, Jewish religious power. It is political satire at its finest on a par with Balaam's talking donkey and the big fish that swallowed Jonah and then burped him out on the shore because preaches cause indigestion. Jesus pokes fun at everything that counts for anything in the world from the back of a donkey.

Jesus is poking fun at all the conventions of Roman political power and Jewish religious power. He is inverting all their notions of power, greatness, status.

You may wonder why I'm picturing the entry into Jerusalem as a divine comedy and why we should be laughing. "Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter." The church has spent a lot of energy attempting to keep down the laughter and elevate the serious. This is why the way of Jesus becomes so difficult for us. We are too serious to take seriously a clown on the back of a donkey turning all the conventions of culture upside down. "This is why festive folk laughter means defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts" (92).

Now, then flip back through the pictures and put them in your mind. Isaac the child of promise on the back of a donkey; Moses, his family on the back of a donkey, going to face Pharaoh with "Let my people go"; Balaam blindly going down a road blocked by the angel of the Lord with his sword drawn, saved from sure death only by his donkey who has spiritual eyesight and talks as well; Jesus riding through the sheep gate on the back of a donkey to save the world from the powers and the principalities. Keep these pictures in your mind. Sometimes what God needs is right here among us where we might think we don't count. But I'm telling you that God has picked you and you count! You matter. You go donkey! You make me laugh for joy, laugh out loud that God has need of us. Amen.