

## Soul Tending: Courage

### Mark 11:1-11

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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, 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.

That was Mary Oliver's poem entitled "The Poet Thinks About The Donkey". Obviously, she wrote this poem about Palm Sunday. I love that she looks at this day - this day of remembering when Jesus rode into Jerusalem with people waving palms to greet him - through the eyes of the donkey. He (or she) is perhaps the least significant character in the story. Our attention is appropriately drawn to Jesus and those who are celebrating him. Yet, Oliver captures so many of the undertones of Palm Sunday by describing it through the eyes of this never-ridden donkey.

Unlike the Roman soldiers also arriving in Jerusalem that day, Jesus doesn't choose a stallion to ride in an effort to show his strength and power. Rather, he picks one of the most humble and mundane animals people of the time might own. He does this to fulfill the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9. *Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.*

In Oliver's poem, the donkey dreams of the freedom other animals have - horses which run in the meadows and doves winging into the sky. Yet, he knows he has a purpose to serve and waits until he is summoned to do what God needs him to do. We hear his wonderment at arriving in the city with so many people about. We sense this whole ordeal might be frightening for him whether he understands what is coming or not. And we see him take his first step forward toward the inevitable fear and anguish of the week ahead. My favorite line in the poem is that last one, "as he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped, as he had to, forward."

Because that is the paradox of Palm Sunday. There is so much excitement and joy with children waving palms and all of us shouting or singing "Hosanna". Yet, even that word betrays

the hidden shadow that lingers in the background of our celebrations. “Hosanna, hosanna in the highest”, which means “Save us!” The people are calling out to Jesus to be the king Zechariah prophesied, the Messiah, expecting him to go to battle to save them from the misery of Roman occupation. Yet, he knows he is not that kind of Messiah. And he knows that this parade is actually leading toward his death.

As we continue our Lenten journey of soul-tending, I think there are two ways we could think about this scripture passage - this story of both celebration and foreshadowing, and I think ultimately they lead us to the same place - our need for connection with God and with each other. The first interpretation would be to focus on the present moment. That when we are in times of fear or challenge, we can still find reason to celebrate if we are present in this moment, not replaying the past or worrying about the future. We do that most easily by slowing down, breathing in, and opening to God, releasing our anxieties so we can be here and now.

The other way to read the Palm Sunday story and apply it to our lives is to consider what we are most afraid of. What are the moments in life when we have had to or will have to take a step forward toward something we dread? And where do we find the courage to do what we must?

I think it’s hard for us to imagine how much courage it must have taken for Jesus to make those first steps on a donkey into Jerusalem. We know, and he knows, the humiliation, violence, betrayal, and horrible death that lie before him. What was he thinking? What was he feeling? Yet, he steps, as he has to, forward.

Of course, we, too, have decisions to make and challenges to face that are so frightening we don’t want to move forward - even if we know we have to. Fortunately, they are few and far between. Facing a long and brutal course of cancer treatment. Walking away from an abusive relationship. Deciding to turn off life-support and allowing a loved one to die. Facing the imminence of one’s own death.

One of the most courageous acts I’ve ever witnessed was my father eating his last meal. He knew it would be his last meal, that the very act of eating would kill him. The doctors had given him a choice between eating and breathing. To eat would mean he would aspirate the food into his lungs and no longer be able to breathe. If he didn’t eat, he would eventually starve to death. It took courage enough to make the choice and much more courage to act on it.

These moments are truly matters of life and death. Yet, if we look at Jesus on this Palm Sunday, there is a confidence, a quiet assurance about him that is really quite remarkable. He has already planned the parade, given the disciples instructions on where to find the donkey, and determined his destination. He climbs on the donkey, smiles and waves at the crowd. People who read the events of Palm Sunday politically would say that Jesus might even be laughing as the parade starts, mocking the parade of Roman soldiers entering Jerusalem on the other side of the city.

Through this coming week, we will only see his assurance falter once - on Maundy Thursday in the Garden of Gethsemane. There among the olive trees, he prays to God, asking to be spared the events which are now just hours away. You can hear the fear and grief in his words. That prayer is a painful reminder of his humanity because it is a prayer we’ve said ourselves.

Spare us the cancer, oh God. Spare us the loss of this loved one. Spare us the inevitability of death.

So, where do we find this courage - the courage to face what we fear most? Most of us were raised with the idea that when times are hardest, we only have to pull ourselves up by the bootstraps, push our way through, grin and bear it. That somehow we alone are the source of our own courage.

But, I think Jesus shows us something very different in this painful scene in Gethsemane. He finds his courage in communicating with God. He reminds us that we find courage by tapping into the bottomless well of divine love, by remembering our place in the eternal order of life and death and life again, and by holding to the promise of the Easter that is coming. We find it in breathing in the Spirit of God who brings us calm and assurance, and by breathing out our fear so the gentle wind of the Spirit might carry it away from us and into the hands of God.

He shows us that courage comes from connecting to a conviction or principle that is bigger than each of us as individuals, a belief that is so important to us that it puts our fear into a different perspective. Perhaps that is the value we place on living fully and dying with dignity. Or perhaps, as with many soldiers in wartime, it is a principle we believe in so strongly that we will take the risk of facing what or whom we fear. Or maybe it is the depth of love we have for our spouse, our children, or another that drives us to go on so we can be present with them as long as possible. Whatever it is, looking beyond ourselves, beyond our fear, gives us the courage to move forward.

Finally, we find our courage in community. These times when we must take a step toward the frightening unknown are when we most need each other. Here in this place, with these friendships and mentors and prayer warriors, we find others who share our faith and our doubts, who will sit with us in the hospital waiting room or the sanctuary, who will simply be present in our fear and our grief so we don't have to be alone. These people sitting around you right now are those who will remind you that God is always near, that God will provide the strength you need, that whatever lies ahead, you can face it.

Today, we enter Holy Week. As the hubbub of the parade dies down, we face with some trepidation Christ's passion. For many of us, the truth of what happened on that Good Friday long ago is so horrific we can't bear to think of it. We want to skip Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and jump straight to Easter. Yet, it is in these events where we see the real power of faith. As Jesus walks through these days ahead, step after step forward as he has to, may we walk with him, learning from him what it means to face our greatest fears with dignity, courage, and love.

May it be so. Amen.