

**Zechariah 9:9**

9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

**Luke 19:28-40**

28 After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

29 When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, <sup>30</sup>saying, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. <sup>31</sup>If anyone asks you, “Why are you untying it?” just say this: “The Lord needs it.”’ <sup>32</sup>So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. <sup>33</sup>As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, ‘Why are you untying the colt?’ <sup>34</sup>They said, ‘The Lord needs it.’ <sup>35</sup>Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. <sup>36</sup>As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. <sup>37</sup>As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, <sup>38</sup>saying, ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!’ <sup>39</sup>Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop.’ <sup>40</sup>He answered, ‘I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.’

*The Lord Needs It*

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ,  
Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Date: April 4, 2004    *Palm & Passion Sunday*    Kevin M. Smith

Text: *Zechariah 9:9, Luke 19:28-40*

When fishes flew and forests walked  
And figs grew upon thorn,  
Some moment when the moon was blood,  
Then surely I was born.

With monstrous head and sickening cry  
And ears like errant wings,  
The devil's walking parody  
Of all four-footed things.

The tattered outlaw of the earth,  
Of ancient crooked will;  
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,  
I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour;  
One far fierce hour and sweet:  
There was a shout about my ears,  
And palms before my feet!<sup>1</sup>

British author G. K. Chesterton, who was born in 1874, wrote this poem called *The Donkey*. Chesterton was a prolific poet and writer. He was famous for writing the book “Eugenics and Other Evils” which of course was an attack on the then popular movement to breed a superior human race. We know what that idea fed—racism, anti-Semitism, hatred of gays, lesbian, and gypsies—hatred of the “other.”

*When fishes flew and forests walked,  
Some moment when the moon was blood,  
Then surely I was born.*

What a vivid folkloric description of a magical time—a brooding time of turmoil *when the moon was blood*.

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<sup>1</sup> Atwan, Robert and Wieder, Laurance (eds.) *Chapters Into Verse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 348.

*With monstrous head and sickening cry  
The devil's walking parody.*

Our hero is not a pleasant site. Our hero is a beast. Oh, the sound of that awful squeal!  
Surely this four-footed beast was cursed.

*The tattered outlaw of the earth,  
Starve, scourge, deride me...I keep my secret still.*

Is this Jesus or is this the donkey colt? For Chesterton, they were poetic kin.

*One far fierce hour and sweet:  
There was a shout about my ears,  
And palms before my feet!*

Andy Warhol talked about everyone getting fifteen minutes of fame. Our hero, the donkey colt, appears to have achieved centuries of fame. In those brief shining moments our donkey helped fulfill prophecy and set the stage for the entrance of an unlikely king.

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!  
Lo, your king comes to you;  
Triumphant and victorious is he,  
Humble and riding on a donkey,  
On a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zech. 9:9)*

Jesus of Nazareth taught in the synagogue and worshipped in the Temple. He must have known exactly what he was requesting when he asked some of his followers to go down from the Mount of Olives into the Bethany-Bethpage community and find him a donkey to ride. Rabbi Jesus knew of the prophesy from Zechariah of a triumphant, yet humble king who entered into the city on a donkey and who *shall command peace to the nations and whose dominion shall be from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth* (Zech 9:10c-e).

Jesus asked not just for any donkey, but also for a *colt that had never been ridden, the foal of a donkey*. Now, perhaps the writers of our gospel story understood that a different picture needed to be painted here. I believe the writers of the gospel message of Jesus Christ meant to convey a message about their God who chose to enter into the broken body and mind that is the human being. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was about more than triumph and praise. The divine God within the human Jesus, *at-one* with Jesus, chooses to ride on a draft animal to begin the last important week of his life in the world. Our little donkey was not a shining proud steed that kings of that time rode. Our donkey was that *other* animal—not glorious, disrespected by society, different, but oh so common. Jesus was human, but oh so divine.

In the ultimate act of self-limitation God entered into Jesus and the human Jesus was in God. God chose a human vessel for works of salvation and liberation. In Jesus God came to know what it meant to be tempted; to know what it felt like—what *we* feel like—when we lose a loved one, or the joy we feel when a loved one holds us close. In Jesus God must have felt what it is like to be an outcast, to *be* the other, to be a person that is hated and scorned because the attacker cannot bear to accept that they might have some of the outcast within themselves.

The passion of Jesus was not limited to that Passover festival week in Jerusalem. The passion of Jesus also occurred in his Galilean travels, in fishing with his friends, in drinking wine and eating bread surrounded by family and friends, in seeing the tears of appreciation and joy in the eyes of the loved one whose child was healed, in a good night's sleep, in a pile of giggling children playing on his lap, in studying the Torah scriptures. On that day on the Mount of Olives when Jesus needed that little donkey, he told his disciples to tell the donkey's owners, "The Lord needs it." Perhaps the Lord needed to experience fully the good and bad times, the fears and hopes we have in order to make our salvation complete, in order for us to be able to understand what true love and compassion really can be. The Lord needed it.

A former professor of mine, Kathryn Tanner helps us with a view of God's work in and through the life and death of Jesus, the "Godself" that was Jesus Christ. Tanner says:

The cross saves, not as a vicarious punishment or an atoning sacrifice ...or as a perfectly obedient act.... The cross saves because in it sin and death have been assumed by the one...who cannot be conquered by them.... The cross is a sacrifice, but only in the same sense that Jesus' *whole life is a sacrifice of love*...[Tanner says that] God, out of love and concern for us, would so humble [the] Godself as to unite [the] Godself with not just lowly humanity but humanity in the most dire straits...Jesus' death is the simple consequence of the life he led on behalf of others...in a sinful world. The perfected humanity of Jesus [Tanner says] is the means of our salvation; we are saved as we are united with him, perfected and glorified, in faith and love.<sup>2</sup>

I do not know that Jesus needed to die the death that was the crucifixion. But, I do know that the life that Jesus led—a life challenging the contemporary power structure, a life that refused to project his own fears or pain onto others, ultimately led him from a triumphal entry to a horrible death. When God entered into human life in Jesus it was an act of self-limitation, an act of pure passion to know *compassion*, an act of seeking to know us fully and love us so completely that *we* might be able to better grasp, better understand the love of God. When God entered into the life of the human Jesus of Nazareth, God was letting go and the Godself that was Jesus made himself vulnerable to all that is human. *The Lord needs it.*

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<sup>2</sup> Tanner, Kathryn. *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001, 29.

In the movie, the *City of Angels*, the character played by Nicholas Cage is a loving angel who watches over people. He watches over people, but somehow does not seem to fully grasp why humans are the way they *are*, or perhaps why he does this angel thing. He partially makes himself known to the character played by Meg Ryan, but only partially. He loves her and then he falls to earth, with no plan except to love her. He sacrifices his state of bliss as an angel for the sake of love. He wants nothing more than to know what it is like to fully love someone and for someone to fully know his love. He comes to know the fullness of life—good tasting food, getting wet in a rainstorm, getting dry before a crackling fire, getting mugged, and the joy and pain and fear of loving someone completely. And then, he loses his loved one to a terrible accident. He entered into the human life that is a life of uncertainty. He entered into a life in which he could not control everything. But, he needed it. Like our friend the donkey colt, Cage’s character might have said, “For I also had my hour; one far fierce hour and sweet.”

God stepped into our lives, put on our shoes. *God needed it.* God stepped into the life of the other so that the other might know God and so God might know the other. God loved the other so much that God became the other. *We cannot become the other.* But through the tragedy and triumph of Jesus Christ we might see how it is possible to love a thing with ears like errant wings. For God *so* loved the world. For God *so loved* the world.

Amen.

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