

Today we find ourselves in the midst of a parade with one attraction: Jesus of Nazareth, humble, and as Zechariah prophesied, “mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zech. 9:9). For there just to be one entry into this parade, Jesus is quite a popular draw. Crowds surround him, decorating his path with palm branches and cloaks, singing hymns and shouting. His is a seismic entrance into the city. But to this point I have to confess my least favorite version of this event is Matthew’s telling of it. Because Matthew is the one who gives us this strange picture of Jesus seemingly riding two animals at once.

In Mark and Luke, Jesus’ ride is more comfortable—just one colt. But it’s an awkward snapshot Matthew offers. You see, Matthew has Jesus sitting on both a donkey *and* her colt. I’ve heard explanations of this awkwardness. Some scholars suggest Matthew is simply emphasizing the importance of Zechariah’s prophecy, heightening the sense of the fulfillment of Scripture. Others suggest Matthew made a mistake (highly doubtful). But what if we take Matthew at his word and reckon Jesus does ride them both at the same time? There are three ways he might do so... 1) Jesus might ride them both comfortably because of the thickness of the cloaks spread over both of them, 2) He might ride them both at different times, or 3) He might have simply ridden the colt, with the donkey attached at the reins, as was customary of the time. If we take this third way of riding both, then I believe it unlocks a powerful meaning about the Triumphal Entry.

In Mark and Luke, the significance of the colt—the young donkey—is easier to capture. For in those days it was common that a king intending to send a message of impending war would ride a war horse. But a king intending to convey a message of peace would ride on a donkey, an animal symbolizing humility and peace. Jesus begins his triumphal march into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, which the prophet Zechariah foretold would be the Messiah’s staging ground for battle. But Jesus is riding a foal of a donkey. Not exactly a Sherman tank. His message is clear. He is royalty. But as royalty, he is the Prince of Peace. We get this sense from Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

But what about the second beast of burden? Why does Matthew give us this other one, tied to the first? I believe it is a bit of tomfoolery on Matthew’s part. Because of all the Gospels, Matthew is the most likely to quote the Old Testament, and to draw most overtly from it. So I want to offer a possibility: that, with this second donkey, Matthew is intending to remind his readers of the story of Balaam’s Donkey.

Do you remember the story?

*So Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the officials of Moab. God’s anger was kindled because he was going, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the road as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. 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 onto*

*the road. Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it scraped against the wall, and scraped Balaam's foot against the wall; so he struck it again. Then the angel of the Lord went ahead, and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Balaam; and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!" But the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you this way?" And he said, "No."*

*Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face (Num. 22:21-31).*

I believe Matthew intends to remind us of our arrogant, stubborn failure to recognize God even when God meets us face to face. It is as if Matthew is teasing us, "The donkey understands. Do you?"

From the very first verse, Matthew is very concerned to show us who Jesus is, where he is from, and why it matters. Matthew ch. 1:1, "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham..." Then, in the center of the Gospel, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" And they answer, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Jesus turns the question on them, "But who do *you* say that I am," and Peter blurts out, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And toward the end of Matthew, Jesus' identity remains a central concern. Pilate asks him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" His torturers mock him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" On the cross, over his head, they write the sarcastic inscription, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." Jesus breathes his last, the curtain tears in two, the earth shakes and the rocks are split, and the dead are raised, and when the centurion and those with him saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

And today, in the triumphal entry, we are given a donkey and the foal of a donkey because Matthew wants the people of God seeing double when they see Jesus: Son of Man, Son of God!

But from the beginning of the triumphal entry to the end, the question is in the air, and the people's vision remains blurred. "Who is this?" the whole city of Jerusalem asks. The crowds aren't sure. Yes, they've waved their palm branches and sung their Hosannas. "Save us Son of David. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" But when Jesus comes into the city what do they call him? "This is the *prophet* Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." They don't know for sure. Is he the Son of David? The Messiah? The Son of God? Or merely, "prophet."

In fact, there's only one demographic in this entire affair who consistently recognizes and worships Jesus. Is it the crowd? No, we don't hear from them after Jesus cleanses the temple.

Drives out the buyers and sellers, turns over the tables of the money changers. The crowd's song stops.

Is it the disciples? It's not clear what the disciples are doing at this point. We might assume they're still with him, but remain just as indecisive as the crowd. It won't be long before Peter denies—multiple times—not knowing at all who Jesus is.

Do the chief priests and the scribes recognize who Jesus really is? Granted, they call his cleansing of the temple and his healing of the blind and the lame “amazing.” But then they become very angry at this one subset of the crowd who keeps worshiping Jesus, even after all this commotion and pomp.

The children. The children are still singing. After all the temple cleansing. The crooks chased out. The tables turned over. Chaos. Probably something on fire somewhere. Then it settles, and Jesus cures the blind and lame who come. And after all this the children are still singing, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” And the chief priests and the scribes are incensed. “Do you hear what these are saying?” Yes, Jesus says, “Haven't you read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?’”

Just a little while earlier, little children were being brought to him. The disciples spoke sternly to those who interrupted Jesus. But Jesus interrupted them, “Let the little children come to me, and don't stop them; for it is such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”

And the disciples should have known better, for just a few days earlier, Jesus taught them, “Who's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”...And calling a child, he said, “Unless you become like children, you'll never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Paul says, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; but when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” But today, this is all backwards. The children have not yet succumbed to disenchantment with the world, they've not yet learned how to turn a side-eye to the amazing things God does in our midst.

When I was a child, I would sit in worship, and, from my perch in the balcony, there in plain view every Sunday was a stained-glass depiction of Jesus the Good Shepherd. He was life-size, standing in a pasture with several sheep. But one of the sheep he had draped over his neck. And I knew without ever thinking that I was that one sheep. Without a doubt, I was the sheep he had draped over his neck. It never occurred to me that I was any other sheep than the one he carried. And held. And saved. I assumed that I could rest in the nape of his neck my whole life long. When I was a child, I thought like a child...

...God gives us these persistent, determined, (annoying), enchanted children to introduce us to the Son's passion, so that we—in our stubborn refusal to see—might yet see, and worship, and, finally...follow.