

8 March 2017
Lent 1 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Greenspring Village, Springfield, VA

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“*Where in the World Is God? On a Donkey*”

Text: Numbers 22:21-35; Matthew 21:1-11

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Where in the world is God? That’s the theme for our midweek meditations this year. Where in the world is God? Who among us hasn’t wondered that when we see the things happening in our world - the sin, the destruction, the hate, the division, the persecution, the evil, the death - all this that causes us to wonder: *Where in the world is God?* Why isn’t God doing something about all this? Or maybe its because of something much smaller than all that; something that’s happening to you. Difficulties that won’t go away. Pains that endure. Questions and doubts that nag. Sin that seems so powerful. *Where in the world is God?* Where is God when you need Him?

This Lenten season, we’re going to go through the story of our Lord’s Passion, the story of Jesus’ last week of life on earth before His crucifixion, and see where God is - where God is **for you**. And that while these may be unusual and unexpected places, they are where you need Him to be. And that these show that He is with you when you find yourself in just such places.

So tonight, we begin with how that last week of Jesus’ pre-crucified life begins, with His entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Where is God? He is seated on a donkey.

That might seem unspectacular to us, and it is. And that’s the point. When God comes to us, He doesn’t come separate from us, but as one of us. Jesus is born in a manger, not a palace. He lives in Nazareth, not Rome. He spends His time with the common folk, not the intelligentsia. And when He arrives in Jerusalem, it is not on a swift and powerful horse, not in a strong and safe chariot, but on a donkey. *A humble beast of burden*, as the prophet Zechariah said. And all this is exactly where He wants to be. Because this is where we are.

But there’s something else about donkeys too - they are not known for being very smart. But maybe that’s not fair. After all, we heard about one very smart little donkey tonight, the one that was carrying a man named Balaam. The king of Moab had summoned him to pronounce a curse from God upon the people of Israel who were traveling to the Promised Land. But God was not going to permit that.

So as we heard, God sent the angel of the Lord to block the way and to slay the one who would curse His people. Balaam didn't know it. Balaam couldn't see the angel of the Lord. But the donkey could. And the donkey, his faithful donkey, served Balaam, even though he beat her for doing so. It was the donkey who was the smart one; Balaam was the one who was not very smart. Balaam wasn't even taken aback when the donkey started talking to him! He just talked right back.

The donkey Jesus was riding *didn't* turn back, though she too was carrying her cargo to his death. Jesus riding into Jerusalem not to curse God's people, but to take their curse. To have the sword of God's justice against the sin of all the world slay Him on the cross, so that we might have life. What an honor, then, for this donkey, a beast of burden, to be carrying God's beast of burden - the Lamb of God, who would bear the sin of the world. Who Himself would carry the sin of the world to the cross and be crushed for it.

And so the donkey plods on. Up to Jerusalem. Up through the throngs of people. But I wonder if it, like Balaam's donkey, saw what the crowds could not see. If the donkey could see the angels of God who were certainly there. And I wonder what the donkey would have said, if she had been given the chance.

But the words that would be heard were not from the donkey this time, but from Jesus, the Word of God, Himself. The words that He would speak from the cross. Words of forgiveness and life. Words of grace and mercy. Words that fill us with faith and hope. That there is hope for us. Hope for us in this faithful one, our faithful Saviour, who would not stop until He laid down his life for you and me.

And so there is hope for you. Whatever situation you are in, wherever you are. God is not far from you, but with you, as close as His Word and Sacrament. He will seem far away, maybe even absent, if you are looking for Him in power, in glory, and in greatness; if you are looking for Him as a swift and powerful conqueror. He will come that way on the Last Day, but until then, like on a donkey. In the common water of baptism. In the simple words of absolution. And in the plain bread and wine of the Supper.

But just as a humble donkey is not a humble donkey when the King of Creation is riding on her back, so these things are not so common, simple, or plain when our Saviour is coming to us in them. Coming to us in them with His forgiveness, life, and salvation. Then, like a talking donkey, they are quite extraordinary, though we may not realize it. They are God coming to save us. To save us from sin, death, and the devil. To save us from ourselves. To save us, so that we get to our destination - our heavenly destination - safely.

So *where in the world is God?* Exactly where He promised to be, and doing exactly what He promised to do. For, after all, He didn't come to give us heaven on earth, but to take us to heaven from earth. Or as the catechism puts it: *To take us from this valley of*

sorrows to Himself in heaven (Seventh Petition). And He will. Even if, like Balaam, we might not be able to see it right now.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.