

Two Donkey Stories revealing the nature of Creation:

Protodeacon Sergei Kapral
Orthodox Church in America

The Donkey in the Cave:

The Orthodox Nativity Icon most often includes a donkey. The Icon shows a mountain, miles from any habitation. In the mountain is a cave; and, in the cave, just Mary, Jesus and the animals are present. Joseph is either not in the picture at all or is shown on the left-hand side, heading towards the cave. Miles from Bethlehem, Mary had been caught short with the first pangs of childbirth. Joseph places her in a cave and rides off to find a midwife. Long before he returns, Mary gives birth to Jesus in the cave in the wilderness, accompanied only by the ox and donkey.¹

We may often see a version of this story as though Jesus descends miraculously from Heaven. But in this icon we see that Jesus' humanity has a central role, as does Mary, as both are protected within the rest of creation. The rich meaning within this icon is also found in Church tradition and liturgical hymns. In short, the Incarnation of Jesus is only possible because every aspect of creation offers something to make it happen... "The heavens offer a star; the angels their song; the earth, a mountain; the mountain a cave; the wilderness its grass for the manger; the animals their warming breath; and humanity Mary's womb..." (Nativity Vespers)². God cannot become human without the full participation of nature.



The Donkey on the Road:



There is another donkey story, "It happened that the Lord left the city and walked with his disciples over the mountains. And they came to a mountain, and the road which led up it was steep. There they found a man with a donkey. But the animal had fallen, because the man had loaded it too heavily, and now he beat it, so that it was bleeding. And Jesus came to him and said, 'Man, why do you beat your animal? Do you not see that it is too weak for its burden, and do you not know that it suffers pains?' But the man answered and said, 'What is that to you? I may beat it as much as I please, since it is my property, and I bought it for a good sum of money. Ask those who are with you, for they know me and they know about this.' And some of the disciples said, 'Yes, Lord, it is as he says. We have seen how he bought it.'

But the Lord said, 'Do you then not see how it bleeds, and do you not hear how it groans and cries out?' But they answered and said, 'No, Lord, that it groans and cries out, we do not hear.' But Jesus was sad and exclaimed, 'Woe to you, that you do not hear how it complains to the Creator in heaven and cries out for mercy. But threefold woes to him about whom it cries out and complains in its pain.' And he came up and touched the animal. And it stood up and its wounds were healed. But Jesus said to the man, 'Now carry on and from now on do not beat it anymore, so that you too may find mercy.' " (Coptic apocrypha fragment)³

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In this second donkey story, creation is being abused. Obviously, the donkey is being abused and we can usually see when humans are abused, but using what the Lord gave us easily becomes ownership and open to abuse. It is better to see ourselves as stewards of creation, responsible for caring for creation. Here the last words of the Lord are very important as stewards; 'Woe to you, that you do not hear how it complains to the Creator in heaven and cries out for mercy...do not beat it anymore, so that you too may find mercy' How are we to interpret these words? It is three times worse if we are the ones harming creation, but woe to stewards who see yet do nothing.

Actually, as Christians, we are priests not just stewards in God's creation. This returns us to the first story and the Orthodox Icon of the Nativity. All creation not just humanity, is in a relationship with God. All aspects of creation must participate for the miraculous to occur. All creation is needed for salvation. We are priests giving thanks for things belonging to the Lord. This action transfigures in the same way as our Lord's Transfiguration, which is the full revelation of creation's possible unity with God

If everything needs to be united with the Lord, then caring and restoring the natural environment becomes our responsibility and our first step in giving thanks to the Lord. In addressing the climate emergency, we cannot just wait for a miracle. We cannot merely rely on others to make the world better, or expect national governments or international agencies alone to produce a miracle. We must make major new commitments and support government actions. The Icon gives us the way to make the miraculous happen by each of us offering what we can to make it possible, by offering creation, not owning it as in the second story. By making major new commitments, as well as doing everything as an offering back to God, we can make the change. Ultimately, the whole of creation is destined to become a Transfigured world, since our salvation involves the salvation of our natural home, the Cosmos.

Discussion questions for the Orthodox Nativity Icon and the story of Christ's encounter with the donkey

- 1 What are some of the roles the donkeys played in the Nativity Icon and story?
- 2 What are the consequences in the donkey story and do they apply to us in any way?
- 3 In the story, why did the man harm the donkey? Why can humans harm creation?
- 4 Will there be donkeys, caves and stars in the Kingdom of God?

- 1 Infancy Gospel Narrative of James is also known as the Protevangelium of James, see also <https://iconreader.wordpress.com/2010/12/24/the-nativity-icon/>
- 2 Mother Mary, Festal Menaion, London, Faber and Faber, 1969 pp. 254.
- 3 Andrew Linzey, Creatures of the Same God, New York: Lantern Books, 2009 pp. 60-61; Laura Hobgood-Oster, The Friends We Keep. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010, pp. 108-09.