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Advent 4

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## **“The Ox and the Donkey”**

*(Isaiah 1:2-3)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: ‘Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand’” (Isaiah 1:2-3).*

### **Collect of the Day**

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**Amen**

In our text, God is putting his people on trial. It's a lawsuit against Israel for repeatedly and habitually breaking the covenant he made with them. God calls on all creation to serve as a witness in the trial, and to testify against his people, because creation was there. Creation witnessed the critical events. "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: 'Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me.'" He thinks of his people as his own children.

The Lord continues the charge against his people: "The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." The ox has a certain knowledge of its buyer and owner. There's a relationship there between a farmer and his ox. He values and cares for his ox and the ox willingly submits to the man. It's big and strong enough to say no to the task of plowing, but it keeps saying yes because it's humble and obedient to its vocation. And the donkey knows where its crib or manger is. At the end of the day, the end of the journey, the donkey will know the way home. That is, even simple farm animals are intelligent enough to know who they are and whose they are. God's people, however, rebelled against him and no longer had this basic knowledge.

And so it is today. Those who are humble enough to have a childlike faith become wise unto salvation, whereas those who are wise and sophisticated in their own eyes are often foolish in God's. They don't know who put them on this earth or why. They lack that basic understanding that even simple farm animals have. They refuse to recognize their Lord, the one who's been caring for them, feeding

them, sheltering them and loves them.

Repeatedly the Bible says, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (e.g. Ps. 111:10). And the first commandment teaches, “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” According to God, true wisdom begins with that knowledge, that trust, and that faith.

Even the ox knows its owner and the donkey its master. They understand. They get it. They’re not so dumb after all. They know to whom they belong. “But Israel does not know, my people do not understand.”

This famous prophecy in Isaiah 1 inspired a tradition that started in the second century [Origen of Alexandria linked Is. 1 to Lk. 2]. The tradition holds that an ox and a donkey were present in Bethlehem, at the stable, when Jesus was born. Let me be perfectly clear; the Bible doesn’t say that. It just says “She gave birth to her firstborn son and . . . laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” Yet most nativity scenes include the presence of sheep, and many include also the ox and the donkey. They’re also in the carols we sing. From “What Child is This?": “Why lies he in such mean estate, where ox and ass are feeding?” Also in the art, the ox and donkey are always doing their part to adore the newborn savior. Their presence is visual reminder of this text, and the message is those who are humble enough can become wise unto salvation, whereas those who think themselves wise and sophisticated can miss out on this Good News entirely.

Artists have been communicating that message for centuries. One of the things I enjoy doing at a museum is looking for the ox and the donkey in the paintings of the nativity. Sometimes they’re front and center. You can’t miss them. They’re crowding in on Jesus. At other times, the artist is almost playing peek-a-boos with us. You have to look for them. Well let’s have a look at some of the art.

Here’s an oil painting from 1515. The artist is Michel Sittow. It’s a night scene so it’s a little dark. The angels are crowding around, but have left a little room for us to peak in. Jesus is our light in the darkness, and in the painting, he

seems to be the source of light, as if he is emanating light onto Mary's face, and the angels' and even the faces of the ox and the donkey in the background.

One of the great things about using old art in a sermon is I can say this is the message the artist intended and he's dead and gone. He can't contradict me. So this is what Sittow intended. These all understand, the angels, Joseph and Mary, even the ox and the donkey. But where are all the people? If they understood the ancient prophecies and trusted in God to fulfill them . . . they would have been there. They would have been waiting and watching for it. They too would have been crowding around. But they're not. It makes me think of those verses from John chapter one, "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him" (John 1:10-11). The ox and the donkey . . . they get it. They know who their master is. They're not so dumb.

Here's a fresco (a painting on a wall) by Fra Angelico completed in 1441. It's in cell number five of a monastery in Florence. You can see a stable built in front of a cave in a hillside. There's Joseph and Mary, and the infant Jesus, St. Catherine of Alexandria on the left and a monk on the right. Four angels are at top. Most of the cells at this monastery have frescos in them. They were meant to help the monks in their meditations. It's never easy to focus the mind. It wants to wander and will at the slightest opportunity. If the monk's eye wanders above the stall, two of the angels will remind him the goal is heaven, and the other two, with their downward gaze on Jesus will remind them to refocus on what's important. Even the ox and donkey are ignoring their hay (at least for the moment) and giving their master and creator their full attention. Again, they're not so dumb after all.

Here's a fresco by Giotto painted in an Italian chapel in 1306. Again, Giotto illustrates the contrast between those who see and know and understand and those who are

distracted. As Mary shifts on her bed, she casts a long, sad look at Jesus. She knows there's trouble ahead. It seems the angels above have a case of Attention Deficit Disorder, and the shepherds on the lower right are distracted by the angels, and I'm not sure what Joseph is doing down there but he's certainly not looking in on Jesus. The ox and the donkey, however, seem to understand and are paying attention to the one who's important.

Here's a 14<sup>th</sup> century fresco by Taddeo Gaddi on the walls of the Baroncelli chapel in Italy. The guy on the left is not sporting a bleached blond afro. What happened is part of the plaster has fallen away. What I like about this one is how the ox and donkey are so inquisitive, so curious. Can you see the ox stretching his neck? They seem almost to be sniffing at Jesus. They want to know more. Shouldn't we? Whoever we are and however much we know, shouldn't we want to know more of our Lord and Savior?

Duccio Di Buoninsegna painted this altarpiece. He completed it in his studio, and on a summer day in 1311 it was joyfully paraded through the streets of Sienna and installed in the cathedral where it remained for the next 450 years. Remember this was an age when there were no T.V.'s or magazines or billboards. Most people had very limited exposure to paintings or images of any kind. You can imagine then for a peasant coming in from the countryside, what an awesome sight this would have been. Over time I'm sure they grew to treasure this painting above the altar. The angels are craning their necks to get a glimpse, but the ox and donkey have the best view in the house. The prophet Ezekiel is on the right, and his scroll refers to the virgin birth. The prophet Isaiah is on the left, and the scroll says, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel."

One more and it's a favorite from Geertgen tot Sint Jans painted in 1490. It's very dark, a night scene. Once again, the light comes from the Christ Child in the manger. It

illuminates Mary, and Joseph who is standing behind her, very dimly, and the angels to the left. An angel in the background is announcing the event to the shepherds, who have set up a camp fire. But the ox and donkey are already there. There's just enough light that you can make out their heads right above Jesus. They know . . . and they seem to be warming Jesus with their breath. And again, their presence is a rebuke of those whose wisdom and sophistication gets in the way. Jesus extolled childlike faith, not childish, but childlike, and said "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it" (Mk. 10:13-16).

So when you see the ox and the donkey in various nativity pictures, let them be a reminder to you. You are an intelligent, well educated people. You are living in the midst of a scientific and technical revolution. There are lots of distractions out there. Think world wide web. Think video games. Think T.V. shows and movies and sports. Think books and periodicals. Lot's of distractions out there, more than ever before . . . all vying for your time and attention. You're lives consist also of faith and of doubt. The devil, the world and your own sinful flesh are warring against that faith. For example, it's being hammered into you that you are the by-product of mere chance and circumstance. But God would have you know you are his dearly loved children. God would have you know he sent his Son Jesus into the world to save you with by his death and resurrection. God would have you know that you belong to him through Holy Baptism. You are **his** people. **He's** the one taking care of you. **He's** the one who feeds and dresses and shelters you, and protects you. He's the one who strengthens you and loves you and by his death and resurrection has redeemed you. Don't let the wisdom of the world get between you and your Redeemer. Don't become so wise and sophisticated that you think you no longer are in need of a Savior. Remember as Frances Bacon so graphically said, "We are all potential carcasses." That is, there's no human wisdom that can save us from death. For that reason alone, the fear of the LORD, faith in the One who

can and does save us from death, that is the beginning of wisdom.

Take your cue then, from the ox and the donkey and this Christmas gather around your Lord's manger with them. Come, let us adore him. Amen.

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