

Encouraged by donkeys

For almost 40 years they have done their plodding, gracious work on me and my vocation.

by [Heidi Neumark](#) in the [April 2023](#) issue



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I recently sent a herd of donkeys from Manhattan to Montana. These included a carved wooden donkey from Prague with a barrel on his back, a yellow ceramic donkey from Mexico embellished with flowers and a fringed saddle, a three-legged donkey positioned so that only I knew his secret, a Hopi donkey bearing sacred drawings, a plastic Eeyore, and so many more. Over the years the herd increased to about 30. Until recently it was stationed on a shelf across my office window.

The donkeys had their origin in South Carolina, where I spent a year off from college on one of the Gullah Sea Islands. I learned from the descendants of those enslaved on nearby plantations, who allowed me to listen in as they sat around telling stories. I learned from lawyers and social workers who supported the islanders in their fight for land rights.

Real estate developers, eager to build resorts on the gorgeous islands, were going up to northern cities to knock on the public housing doors of islanders' distant relations, who were happy to sign away their portion of ownership of a property they'd never heard of for an easy \$100 in cash. I got to know one of the social workers, a faithful Baptist hired by Lutherans to do her undercover research and warn the relatives—an ecumenical conspiracy against land theft. I witnessed a congregation shouting in island praise houses and organizing for justice. And then I spent the summer at an inland retreat center.

At the time, I was reluctant to speak of my faith, but after the witness I beheld on the island, I felt pushed toward greater public testimony and ministry, including possible ordination. But that thought was followed by a parade of doubts: I can't speak in public. I can't preach. I'm too shy. I don't fit in.

Then one Sunday at the retreat center, I heard a young priest preach about donkeys. He mentioned that if God could use a donkey to carry Jesus into the city, God could use us, too. His words were liberating. If a donkey can carry Jesus to others, so can I. If Jesus had need of a donkey, Jesus might have need of me.

More recently, I've noticed that Jesus sends for a donkey in the village of Bethphage, which means "house of unripe figs"—fruit that is not yet ready. Jesus seeks his donkey there. I've kept my donkeys close at hand to remind me of this when I don't feel ready or ripe for a task. For almost 40 years they have done their plodding, gracious work on me and my vocation.

When I was a pastor in the Bronx, we began a tradition of getting a real donkey for Palm Sunday. A child would put on their Jesus crown and ride a donkey named Baby around the block as we followed, waving palms and singing. The men who hung out in front of the bodega down the street always looked up in amazement. After the procession, Baby would go back into her trailer as we went into the sanctuary to continue worship.

Everything went smoothly until the year it didn't, the day Baby refused to budge. Finally, and with great difficulty, we forced her back into her trailer. After that, we made do with a pony.

Soon after Baby balked, I was speaking at a protest against corrupt education officials who stubbornly refused to carry our children forward, asses who didn't deserve their increasing pay. I had a permit for the protest, but the city cut off the mic as I spoke—so I spoke louder, no longer shy about public witness.

When I moved to a church in Manhattan, we adopted the Palm Sunday donkey tradition. We parade down Broadway as people peer through diner windows or step out with their phones to record our progress. I'd procured the Bronx ponies from a local stable, but after moving, I found a stable on the Upper West Side, just 15 blocks from the church. It turns out that Manhattan ponies, like so much else, are unaffordable. It is cheaper to have a pony travel from the Bronx.

This Palm Sunday will be my last. With retirement looming, I'm doing so many things for the last time. I'll have been in New York for 40 years. I have served in loving places that accepted my failings often better than I did, something I do not take for granted. I am filled with gratitude and, of course, regret—for all the things I didn't do, or didn't do well, or didn't complete. The times when I was too weary and heavily burdened to do much of anything. The times when I felt that I was the heavy burden but found myself carried forward on the gentle flanks of sure-footed, inexplicable grace.

I've been slowly packing for the move. We bought a house across the street from our daughter, daughter-in-law, and two granddaughters. It's perfect for us but rather small, and there's simply not room for everything. I've already packed up 15 boxes of books to give away, with more to come.

My other daughter-in-law is a pastor in her first call. Before she became my daughter-in-law she was an intern with us in New York, preparing for urban ministry, yet she finds herself pastoring a church in Libby, Montana, population 2,750. All of our weekly supervisory sessions took place in the presence of the donkeys, which are now on their way to Libby. Knowing that the donkeys will remain in the family and perhaps continue their ministry of encouragement made it easy to send them packing. And, of course, I can visit.

Now I have to decide what to do with the herd of cows and host of angels inherited from my mother. Not sure about the cows, but I think the angels are coming with me.