



Voice still and small, deep inside all, I hear you call, singing. A comedian I like said once, "It's fine to hear voices, the problem is when you start talking back." A younger self might've laughed and thought that was funny too, but it's no laughing matter for people who've changed their worlds, who've upset and upended their lives because of a message that they heard and chose to answer. Throughout scripture, throughout story and the tales we all tell each other are those who hear a voice, a message about what they must do and how to do it. These are the revolutionaries or maybe the change-makers or the disruptors as the kids call them these days. Prophet, I think, is the word of our ancestors. Conscious maybe or divine intervention, or if you're Jiminy Cricket, a bolt out of the blue, but all of these may call us, they may call you, they may scream to you aloud this week as you hold your phone or your laptop and heave it against the hardest surface you can find from time to time. That's why I have such inexpensive phones, by the way.

Voice still and small, like a solo tune, melody in our mind. Today in our reading, we hear from Mary Oliver, one of the anointed prophets or voices of Unitarian Universalism whom we trust with our feelings because she seems to write them out so well on paper, so clearly, so often. In the piece we have today, she lets us know in the title that she's thinking about the donkey. He was what he had always been, small, dark, obedient. I hope finally, he felt brave. I hope finally, he loved the man who rode so lightly upon him, as he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped as he had to forward.

This is the donkey who is taking Jesus of Nazareth into the gates of Jerusalem. That is the man the poet hopes finally the donkey loved. This man whose burden for the donkey is so light. As the donkey did what he had to do, go forward to make his way into the city past and through the open gates, did the man he carried wonder, guess, or maybe guess again, at the messages he was

receiving, the voice in his own ears telling him to go into a place where danger lurked, where the state apparatus and powerful faith leaders had marked him as trouble, as a problem, and still to do what he had to do?

The scene begins the week that is referred to as the Passion. Today is marked by the entry into Jerusalem, when Jesus, a millennial Jewish prophet, is greeted by some who knew him and some who don't, with clear, great cheer and the welcomes of hosannas, even laying palms down in the path of his donkey, like was customary, actually, for arriving kings or heroes in that day. Scholars tell us that even kings would ride into towns on donkeys in times of peace, but would ride a horse in times of war. So this was the peaceful welcome of a would-be king, of someone they adored, someone that they loved, because that is what hosanna means, it's the explanation of adoration and of joy, that, as the story says, was shouted not just from the people, but the rocks themselves began to sing.

But what is passion? We hear the word. I think passion today means something deeply satisfying, maybe transfixing or perhaps even engrossing. A passion project, you've got to find your passion, we hear that a lot, but that is not the passion that starts today. No offense to you crocheters out there. Passion's root is the Latin *passio*. Any native ancient Latin speakers here? No, you're all a bit young. But what does *passio* mean, does anyone know? Suffering and pain. I've got another one from TJ today about suffering and pain. No, I'm sorry, because I don't mean to diminish it. What anyone calls passion today, it's just you've got to take a moment and bring to mind this ancient meaning of pain, of suffering, and think of an impulse, a compulsion, an inability to stop or control your own actions that you know will cause you pain, and still you do what you feel like you have to do, like an overwhelming tide in your body pulled ashore by your mind.

This I am compelled to do, though I know it may cost me and my family dearly, I will go on, I will go past, or to say go on or go past in Latin, *passare*. Now, I'm enough of an amateur word etymologist to know that just because two root words are similar, it doesn't mean that they're related in their origin, but these two are related as they are perceived by our senses to be sure, *passio*, pain, *passare*, to go forward, to go past, the pain and the path we take, that we travel, are intertwined, are intertwined for a lot of us right now. Many of us are horrified daily or hourly by much of what we see in the news, much of what we fear about our future unfolding, and if you are hearing messages, if a voice still and small is growing louder, don't worry, it just might mean you're a prophet too.

The suffering of prophets of all kinds, the true suffering of a person and their people and the path laid before them has been a part of human struggle, has been a part of this, faith's struggle has been a part of each of our own individual struggles for a long, long time. These are times for many of suffering and pain, so these are times for passion. And pain is not always bad, it can be clarifying, it's there to tell us when something is wrong. It can be clear what may be blocking us by getting us to change what's wrong or to launch us into something we know we must do, to take some kind of fixing action. Pain makes its way without anything stopping it. It is good to pay attention to the pain when we have it.

We are the inheritors of a faith that can be a path through pain, as it has been for centuries. Many who were not raised in this faith sometimes see it first, first, as a refuge from past beliefs, beliefs that cause needless suffering, needless passion or made no sense anymore. I remember when that pain stopped for me. I remember walking into one of our churches, sitting down past those sanctuary doors, and for a while, the pain stopping was enough. In some ways, doing that, the passion though can fade when the pain isn't feeding it anymore, and that is a mistake, it's selling this faith short. It's a mistake to define this faith by what we don't believe. We all must turn as we grow in our faiths at some point to face what we do believe, to hear the voice still and small calling to us. That is where the power is, that is where the path to freedom lies.

Our faith does not teach us that the person of Jesus was God. Though some of us here may believe that, I don't personally, and no one here will require that you do or that you don't. We literally don't care what you believe about that. We do believe, we believe that a human who enters a city occupied by a violent political power in league with some members of the dominant faith who descends against that toxic mix of empire and religion was on to something, like a lot of good prophets were. We watch and we feel the pain now as an administration disappears people to foreign jails with impunity because of the tattoos they have, I've got a few myself, as students lose their legal residency because of social media posts or protests that they organized, as due process is skirted with the blessing of administrative judges. I use that word lightly and more.

The pain that is happening now to us and to those we know and read about is real, the passion is here, and the path forward we know is hard, even when we hear what we need to do still and small and urging. We ask where we must, where we can turn for answers, many are asking that now. Now, the French philosopher and theologian, Jean-Luc Marion, and whenever something seems dark, I quickly turn to French philosophy because I really want to go there in the darkness, but Marion talks a lot about something important right now. He talks about icons and he talks about idols. It's the cornerstone of much of his theological and philosophical work. He names them as two manners of beings for beings. We are the beings and we have icons and idols to look at, to appreciate, to sacrifice our attention to.

An idol represents and presents itself to be seen. It wants us to pour into it all of our thoughts and our fears, all of the things we want to see in the world just like us. It wants to be gazed upon in its fullness. It looks for opportunities to be in the center of a room, whether that room is shaped like an oval or a square. But Marion says that not only physical objects, not only people can be idols, a concept can be an idol too, and this idea rings true in the pages of an article that haunted me a bit in the past month, and especially this week. Zoe Bernard, the great writer, wrote a piece for Vanity Fair in the last issue about a big change in the world of venture capital. "Where's he going with this?" He asks. It's called God Complex, and its subtitle is Christianity was Borderline Illegal in Silicon Valley, Now it's the New Religion.

The article details the rise of forms of Christianity in the Valley that seem to be driven by the faiths of some of the wealthiest investors in the world, including Peter Thiel, who has bankrolled a range of political candidates, yes, and who are aligned with his interests, both theological and business-

wise. The article looks at Trae Stevens, co-founder of a defense tech company that partners with Thiel's venture capital fund. The author's words, "Stevens has lately been speaking publicly about his faith in the context of Silicon Valley. He has hosted a Bible study reflecting on the teachings of Rene Girard, a French philosopher popular in certain libertarian-leading tech circles." Don't say I didn't warn you about French philosophy. "He has spoken at his church about the connection between Christianity and innovation, and written, in what seems a highly contorted interpretation of the gospel, about how basic venture investing principles are an exemplar of divine forgiveness."

Yeah, I wonder if he is forgiving debt every seven years, as the Old Testament says. Yeah, that's right. Probably not. The article chronicles the rise in attendance at churches in San Francisco that appeal intentionally to venture capitalists and that host events about finding God in our investments. Yeah, nothing wrong with investing in a church, I've just got to say, but interesting. And it addresses the thing on everybody's mind, on everybody's mind right now, AI steak sauce. Oh no, wait, no, I'm sorry, that's AI, I missed that. If our secretary of education doesn't know one from the other, why should I, right?

But listen, all steak sauce jokes aside, listen, the bulk of new venture capital, the majority of new capital, is going into military defense and artificial intelligence projects and startups and companies that combine the two. One observer of this phenomenon, Luke Burgis, a Catholic entrepreneur who's presented at the Vatican on issues around artificial intelligence, said, his words, "In Silicon Valley, there's a strong strain in which they're trying to create something that would take the place of a God, and ever and ever more, the companies receiving the money are those run by people who are professing many their newly-found Christian faith publicly and proudly as if their funding depends on it, because in many cases, it does." Yeah.

Now, I don't know if you can get closer to Marion's definition of an idol than that, artificial intelligence, that you literally feed with your own thoughts, your own feelings, your own needs and your own money. What God is being welcomed into the city now? What praises and hosannas are being shouted on high for this God? What acolytes are praising and supporting this arrival? I myself am a little afraid of a God that can know no pain or understand any *passio*, I'm a little afraid of the dimension lost to such a being, to such a concept, to such an idol. Maybe, maybe, maybe tremendous good will come from this work, maybe ideals that mean flourishing for all will come and come soon, but the combination of overwhelming wealth and power, concentrated in a few hands and then mingled with the religious fervor we are seeing, has rarely boded well for the most vulnerable among us or really for anyone at all.

The darkest, the darkest chapters in human history are written by those who believe in the superiority and the righteousness of their idea of God and their strength and power, and they use that belief and they use that power and that idea of God to take from weaker people all they want, to enslave, to displace, to eradicate a people whose God is different, whose faith differs. If this faith offers anything to the world, and I think it offers a lot, it holds the promise that no God can be so superior to another that horror brought on others is acceptable or justified in the name of that God. If you are looking for something we are and not just what we are not, that is one thing we are. Our

faith makes way for beliefs and questions that differ, that ask. In this faith, we choose. For centuries, at the core of this faith is choice, is comfort and [inaudible 00:19:08] for the heretic, which only means the one who chooses.

On this day, the day we remember the one who took a path laid out before them by the voice in their head, ringing in their ears, perhaps still and small, deep inside us all, today on this day, before a miracle was ever in the mind of that soul, the hard and painful passion laid bare under the palms of praise on the path, the passage, the passare before them, we remember the choice made, the donkey mounted, the passing of the gates one last time into the city where his fate awaited him. To feel the fear of empire, to know the threat of a government intertwined with religion, of a populace, under pressure, looking for something powerful to embrace, picking off political dissonance under the guise of safety and to do what must be done anyway. To choose the way of love for our friends and the way of love for our enemies is the pathway to peace at last and how we make way for the great events that may come to pass.

To that, to that, I will lift hosannas, to the sureness that none of us here is alone, to the blessing that we are all loved here, to the sanctity of believing that we are enough, we are worthy. Our dignity is holy here. We don't preach this at this church for points, we don't preach it because we have to or because we are shaming or criticizing another faith. These are the gifts of our faith, these are the promises we make to each other, we who choose community rather than coercion, love and not fear or hate, as prophets of the voice inside us all still and small calling us here together as one, and we come like our beloved donkey because it's what we know we must do, and we enter the city with the same reason, because we know it's what we must do. So may we each, may we all, make such a way. May it ever be so, blessed be, and amen.