

Nestor, the donkey who was born deaf and blind

Once, a donkey was born in the House of Bread, Bethlehem, a Jewish village in the midst of the People of Iron, the Romans, whose government ruled the known world.

His parents named his Nestor, which means home.

They loved him deeply, and when they looked at his beautiful, brown fur and listened to his steady, peaceful heartbeat they knew he was home to them.

On the night Nestor was born, as he laid on the dirt of the ground of the stable on the outskirts of Bethlehem, there were noticeable things about him.

One of those things was that he was little, minutely small.

He was the opposite of the People of Iron, who were big, enormously giant.

Another was that he was easily overlooked, the opposite of the People of Iron, who would one day be written and remembered in the annals of history.

Few would remember little Nestor.

It could be said of him what would later be said of St. Ignatius, "Non coarctari a maximo, sed contineri a minimo, divinum est," which means simply, "Not to be limited by the greatest, and yet to be contained in the tiniest - this is the divine."

Nestor was a living example that no one should be frightened by the big things, but should go forward and take heart in the small things.

Nestor was born deaf and blind.

"How can a deaf and blind donkey teach the world to be unafraid and heart full?" the world might ask.

And this story takes that question to heart.

Donkeys, when they are born healthy in the world, have a sense of hearing so well developed they can hear the call of another donkey from miles away.

Donkeys, when they are born healthy in the world, develop strong bonds, preferring to spend time with their chosen companions with bonds that are so close that being separated can cause them to become extremely stressed and even ill.

But Nestor was not born healthy in the world.

Neither his mom nor his dad spoke about the way of life Nestor wouldn't have, but in moments they were alone together tears dropped from their earthy, brown eyes to the stable ground and formed small puddles of despair that whispered, "My child, my child, why has life forsaken you?"

On those first days of Nestor's life, his parents feared that the inn keeper who owned the stable would send him away, for what could a deaf and blind donkey DO to be productive in its work.

"Nothing," sighed the inn keeper at sunset, "Except take food where we barely have enough to survive and shelter where we barely have enough room to live and give nothing in return.

Poor Nestor.

The inn keeper was right.

There was nothing Nestor could DO.

But it is here, at the still point, that we must remember something about Nestor that we learned at his birth.

It was something about his heart.

Do you remember?

When one was very still and very quiet, when one listened carefully as Nestor laid curled in the hay, one could hear his steady, peaceful heartbeat as it tapped out a tender beat about home and a courageous beat about being unafraid of the big things in the world and aware of the small things.

As we all know, time is fleeting.

If time was lasting, I would sit beside you underneath an ancient shade tree and tell you all of the stories of what it was like to BE Nestor of Bethlehem.

But time is fleeting so I must tell you only one story, only one small moment, that will show who Nestor was in the world and why we should never forget him.

It was a starry, starry night and one of the stars sat directly above the stable where Nestor, his mom and his dad slept each night.

Though Nestor couldn't see the star above him, we know about his heart, and so we won't be surprised to learn, in the ways of mystery that we can know yet never fully understand, Nestor could feel the star.

One thing that might surprise you, though, is that the star was a little, minutely small.

You might think that a star a donkey could feel would be big, enormously giant.

But this is not true, and reminds us that from time to time the things we think we know for sure, well, we don't know at all.

The star was indeed little, minutely small in the sky, the smallest star in the sky that night, but it was incredibly bright, so bright that the visitors in the inn were heard to say, "There's no need to trim and light our lamps because we can see better by the light from that little star than we can see with all of our lamps burning in the windows and on the tables."

What a wonder.

A little, minutely small star with an incredibly bright light.

No one from memory or study of history had ever known or learned such a thing.

But Nestor knew deep down in his heart that it was true.

Just as Nestor was thinking about the star, two people came into the stable and sat down wearily beside him.

One of them ran his cracked and calloused hands across his beautiful, brown fur and Nestor could feel they were hands that did hard work.

The other was very still and very quiet and simply sat beside him, resting her extended belly on the part of his chest that held his heart.

Nestor knew there was a baby inside of her, for he felt a steady, peaceful heartbeat like his own.

Again, there are ways of mystery that we can know but never fully understand, for as Nestor felt the heartbeat of the baby, he understood the baby and the baby understood him.

Here in this stable, where a little, minutely small yet incredibly bright star sat above them, a donkey who could neither hear nor see could communicate with a baby who could not yet speak a human language.

Ah, the ways of mystery.

You may wonder, "What did the baby say?" and it is a kind of wonder, a curious kind of wonder, that I'm glad you have for it moves the world.

"I'm afraid," said the little baby.

"I'm here," said Nestor.

"Stay with me, please," said the little baby.

"I will," said Nestor.

There was commotion, even chaos, all through the night, but Nestor could neither see nor hear it.

It was only later, when a writer wrote down the story, that Nestor learned the person who was so still and quiet beside him, so still and quiet he could hear the heartbeat of the baby inside of her, gave birth to a boy who she wrapped in rags and laid in the hay of Nestor's manger for they were very poor.

When the boy was born, and opened his brown eyes, the first thing he saw was Nestor beside him, just as he said he would be.

The man with the cracked and calloused hands picked up the baby out of the manger and laid him beside Nestor.

The baby had been crying, but hushed as he felt Nestor's steady, peaceful heartbeat and he remembered the words Nestor had said to him.

"I'm here."

As is the way of a baby in rags lying in a manger, some of the pieces of hay stuck to the baby.

And as the man with the cracked and calloused hands laid the baby against Nestor's beautiful, brown fur and courageous heart, some of the hay fell around Nestor's eyes and ears.

The mother of the baby took some of that hay in her hands and rubbed it on Nestor's eyes and ears.

For the first time in his life, Nestor saw the sunrise and heard the life of the people at the start of the day in Bethlehem.

His heart spoke again to the little baby.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"You're welcome," the little baby whispered back.

From that day on, Nestor became the donkey for the little baby boy and the little baby boy grew to become the caretaker of Nestor.

Together, though they were little, minutely small, and mostly forgotten, they journeyed through life unafraid of the big things and appreciative of the small.

And they became home to each other.

And to the whole, wide world.