What is that?

That was his first thought. And, as Tapeinos turned to look at what someone had set upon his back, he almost bucked in disbelief. Immediately he set about hee-hawing in protest at today’s burden.

Tapeinos didn’t hee-haw that often. In fact, there were only three things that made Tapeinos hee-haw. The first was today’s issue — if he didn’t like something he’d hee-haw loud and hard in objection. The second reason for which Tapeinos heehawed was to draw attention to himself. I mean, if there were a sleek 275 pound mare making her way down the lane, how else would she know he was interested?

The third reason Tapeinos hee-hawed was for the absolute joy of hee-hawing. Nothing made him feel more alive, nothing delighted him more than a good bray sometimes.

At this moment, though, Tapeinos did not hee-haw for attention or for joy, he brayed in resistance to the cargo he was forced to carry today.

It was a full grown man. Tapeinos wanted to see more of Him so he turned to look more fully. But every time he turned, the man sitting on his back always swung around behind him.

Yet, he saw and remembered one thing about the Rider. The eyes. Tapeinos had seen a lot of eyes in his three years. They glared at him past the veiled mouth and nose when the dust kicked up in the wilderness near Masada. They threatened him in the pre-dawn light as his master, Jacob, loaded him with the olive oil he delivered almost every day.

Tapeinos was always looking at eyes because that’s what looked back at him. As a pack animal, he’d always been used for carrying oil, water, spices, even rock. And usually that meant that a person would be in front of him pulling his lead. Whenever Tapeinos would stop, eyes would glare back at him, flashing or squinting in threat.

The man on Tapeinos’ back this day had eyes as full of life as any he’d ever seen. But there was something else. There seemed to be a connection between Tapeinos and this Stranger, as strong as he’d felt as a colt with his mother. That’s why he kept turning around. He wanted to see Him.

At that moment the Stranger leaned over and whispered something in Tapeinos’ ear — “Thank you for the honor of sitting astride your back, Tapeinos.”

“How did He know my name?” was followed quickly by another thought. What is that smell?

Every time the wind changed the pungent odor of nard hit the donkey’s nostrils. He’d not smelled that potent a fragrance since … since … since the funeral last month! Despite His eyes, the Rider carried with him, on him, the smell of death.

Those standing around noticed a calm, almost an assurance, come over the animal after the Rider spoke to it.

And then, the journey began. It wasn’t a long trip. Only a few stadia, but it was one Tapeinos would never forget.

Tapeinos though, surprised everyone, by beginning to walk, slowly, toward the main road — the one that led …. to Jerusalem.

Tapeinos kept thinking about the Man’s eyes, the smell, and his words. Who was This? The connection he sensed with his Rider though wasn’t his alone. He saw the attachment, the relationship that these dozen or so around him felt towards the Rider too.

Their eyes kept looking at Him, no, to Him. They were proud, enthusiastic about what was occurring. Their eyes told of their eagerness. Particularly the one leading Tapeinos.

But Tapeinos knew eyes. This one leading him was not to be trusted. Tapeinos could see more than excitement in this one’s stare. He saw ambition. And he’d seen a similar look in other eyes too. It was greed.

“Judas,” said the Rider. “Are you ready to do what we must do?”

The one leading Tapeinos smiled triumphantly and announced, “Yes, Lord. Let’s do it.”

Do what?

The one called Judas pulling on the donkey’s rope seemed delighted at what lay ahead. The Rider? From the feel and the glances Tapeinos could steal at him the Rider seemed prepared, resolved, but certainly not eager for what lay beyond the Mount of Olives. He wasn’t like the others. This one called “Lord” was alone in his melancholy. All others thrilled in the day.

Shortly, these dozen or so were no longer alone. The small party of travelers swelled. Grandparents, mothers, business people, children, farmers, merchants joined the Rider and his parade as they neared Jerusalem. And they did some of the strangest things!

Some lay their robes in the road and let Tapeinos step on them! He remembered once stepping on Jacob’s cloak and being whipped! But these people intentionally allowed Tapeinos to walk over their clothes.

He’d never seen such a spectacle! They knew what they were doing! Some of those who lined the way were educated men. Some were sophisticated tax gatherers. He could tell they’d never done such before!

Why now?

Still others cut branches from olive, palm, mustard, and date trees and laid them in the road. The crowd grew larger and larger. Tapeinos looked ahead and saw people who were all shouting, “Hosanna”

“Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Blessed is the King of Israel!”

King?

For a moment Tapeinos stopped in disbelief! The man sitting on his back was a king? What kind of king rides a donkey? Don’t they all ride horses like Ballo, the ebony Batanean stallion who’d ridden into Bethany only a night earlier?

What kind of king has to borrow an animal and then borrows a donkey? Tapeinos wondered. Yet, here was a huge crowd! Gathered to greet this one they called “King” and “Lord.” Children squealed in delight, women looked to him with tear-streaked faces, and men, some of whom Tapeinos recognized as hard, seemed awestruck. Every face shone that day.

Hosanna meant “Save.” This crowd was calling out to the Rider to “save them.” Many reached out as Tapeinos went by to touch the Rider and, if they couldn’t touch Him, they’d just touch Tapeinos. What kind of king was this?

He thought he heard one man say, in a rock-chiseler’s whisper, “That’s Jesus boy. And I was there. I saw him call Lazarus of Bethany back from the dead!”

“Lazarus of Bethany!” Tapeinos stumbled in disbelief almost upsetting the Rider, the one called “Jesus” and “Lord.”

Lazarus of Bethany! That’s the last time Tapeinos had smelled that sharp aroma of nard. Jacob had to rush some spices for a burial in Bethany. It seems, Tapeinos learned, that a man named Lazarus, had died. Tapeinos bore several large containers of nard to the sisters’ house that Lazarus’ might receive a proper burial.

And Tapeinos knew. Lazarus was as dead as any man he’d ever seen. And yet this One, this Rider, this Jesus, this King, this Lord had called him back to life?

No wonder the crowd stood mesmerized. No wonder they call him, “Lord.” No wonder they stood — was it four-deep or five-deep? — to see him pass.

No wonder their hands reached out if only for a touch!

No wonder Tapeinos felt so strange. It wasn’t merely that no man had ever ridden him before. It was that This was no ordinary Man, no routine rider. This One was Special.

But there was still one question troubling Tapeinos. Why would the Lord, the King, the most amazing One he’d ever heard about choose a donkey? It was certainly no regal ride.

As a matter of fact, donkey riding was quite awkward.

Tapeinos felt the weight of the rider shift forward. He sensed more than saw the smile on Jesus’ face as the Lord said, “I chose you Tapeinos because I am like you. You are like me.”

I am lowly and humble. I carry a burden far heavier than any other can carry. I am scorned and ridiculed. I will be beaten and mocked. I am seemingly too small for some, yet too much for others to handle. I am misunderstood.

I chose you, Tapeinos because your name means “humility.” And that is my way too. I chose you Tapeinos because I am like you.

“He’s like me?” And then, Tapeinos did what any donkey in his right mind would do: he tree-hawed with every ounce on his 300 pound frame. No, not for the mere joy of it. Not to draw attention to himself or express his displeasure.

Tapeinos didn’t mean to bray. It just came out that way. What he meant to say, no, shout, was “Hosanna! Hosanna!”

Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!

And, for the first time that day, the Rider, the King, the Lord laughed in delight. You see, He alone knew what a humble donkey on the road to Jerusalem with a precious cargo would say. Why, if Tapeinos hadn’t brayed it, the rocks themselves may have roared it.

Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is the King of Israel!