

## **THE JOURNEY INTO LENT – What will you risk?**

(Reflection for March 1, 2020)

My friends, once again I welcome you to the Lenten series, “Entering the Passion of Jesus,” through which we will “freeze-frame” moments of Holy Week. The series focuses on the theme of risking taking, which is what the entire Passion narrative represents. At every turn, Jesus risks arrest and possible death because of his actions and teachings. Those who follow Jesus risk their own lives.

We watch the people around Jesus – his disciples, his friends, his companions. These are the ones who have been with him since the beginning of his ministry in Galilee. These are the ones that witnessed his devotion to God and how Jesus extended God’s love to all, healing the sick, sharing meals with the alienated, and proclaiming the good news that God’s love is not just for some but for all.

Yet, we see these same companions and friends, deny, betray, and run away from him when the cost becomes too high, when discipleship is too risky. The Holy Week stories enable us to see ourselves in Peter, John, James, and Judas because their stories are our stories. Who stands firm, and who runs? And what can we do now that we have failed ourselves and Jesus? These are the faith stories that call us to move from merely talking about our faith to bringing our faith alive through our actions.

This series is not just about taking a closer look at the history behind the events of Holy Week. It is not just a review of these stories that speak of risk, danger, wonder, forgiveness and love. This is a spiritual journey that invites us into some personal introspection. It calls us to question what we stand up for and ask the questions: When do we stand up for what we believe? What does it mean to misunderstand, to fail? What does it mean to deny, to betray, to fall asleep when we should have acted? What is the cross we are bearing? How do we rise again?

We will be encouraged to think about reconciliation because Lent and Holy Week are about reconciliation. How can we be reconciled to ourselves, to others, and God when we have not stepped up or when we have looked the other way, and not done what we know we ought to do? We think about our relationships with others – family, friends, neighbors, and even people we do not like. How do we be reconciled when our relationships have deteriorated? Throughout this season, we have an opportunity to reflect as we think about our lives alongside the life of Jesus, inviting inward transformation that leads to outward action.

This Sunday's story focuses on the beginning of Passion Week, Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, that will lead us into the larger story of tragedy and triumph. We already know what Jesus is to face and the story of resurrection, so we embrace this series with hope and joy. Let us enter the story with compassion.

The account of the triumphant entry of Jesus occurs in all four Gospels. Each Gospel presents a variation of the story, with all of them contributing to the larger story of Jesus' journey to the cross. There is so much that can be said about what is going on in this story that it simply cannot be covered in a single Sunday morning reflection. We will focus on the story as presented in the Matthean version written by an educated Jewish evangelist who draws on prophecies and characters from the Scriptures of Israel, utilizing from those scriptures images of the colt, the humble savior, the cries of "Hosanna!" and the palms. I am also referring to Amy-Jill Levine's book *Entering the Passion of Jesus*, that this series uses as its inspiration.

Let us imagine the city of Jerusalem populated with middle and upper-class people now tripling its population as thousands upon thousands come from neighboring towns and cities to celebrate the great feast of the Passover. People are excited and wondering about what the day will hold. Soon they will witness two significant events: Pontius Pilot will be making his appearance, with his royal entourage, to inform the Jewish people that Rome is in his charge. The other is that a beloved leader and teacher will enter the city on a colt surrounded by a crowd of despised outsiders—the hard-working have-nots who live on the farms and work the land providing food and resources for the city's elite.

One may wonder what Jesus is thinking in deciding to come to Jerusalem at such a time with his sights set on bringing his ministry of God's love that in every way will violate the rule of the Roman government and the religious authorities. Levine writes, "For Jesus, the risk of riding into Jerusalem in a victory parade is very real. And Jesus' entry calls attention to himself in a major way."

Jesus tells two of his friends to go into a nearby village and to bring to him a donkey and colt. Levine writes that Jesus was familiar with the area around Jerusalem having been there many times. He most likely had friends, some of whom owned donkeys or colts (young donkeys). For Levine, this indicates that Jesus made plans for this parade, willingly putting him in harm's way.

Let us imagine being a person in Jerusalem seeing this crowd of have-nots and others who had been loved by Jesus cheering and singing

as Jesus rides into the city gates on a young donkey? The crowd surrounding him treats Jesus as a king, placing branches and cloaks along the pathway. The tree branches and cloaks form a carpet because a king does not touch the soil and stones upon which ordinary people walk. One might think a horse would be a more obvious choice for a king, but this king does not enter with the trappings of royalty or military might. That is not the type of rule he teaches.

The gospel writer pulls into his story images from the prophet Zechariah who proclaimed that a king would come, humble and mounted on a colt to save his people. In the Hebrew context, "humble" does not mean "meek" or "gentle;" it means being "poor" or "afflicted."

The Greek term for "meek" translates as "someone in authority who does not lord it over others." When the image of "humble" occurs in the text, it does so, "not in a sense of being lowly, but in the sense of being able to listen to others, to share resources, to prioritize community rather than authority, to serve rather than be served." This description aptly describes Jesus.

As he enters Jerusalem Jesus is surrounded by shouts of Hosanna. "Hosanna" is a Hebrew term that means, literally, "save, please." It harkens back to Psalm 118, a psalm of praise and salvation celebrating the Exodus. One could imagine how these songs of Hosanna that rang out through the streets would strike anger in the hearts of those in authority.

In the Gospel of John only is there reference made to the waving of palm branches, the others mentioning only tree branches. The images of branches or palm leaves are an essential part of the story. In Psalm 92:12, it reads, "The righteous flourish like the palm tree," and in Leviticus, people are encouraged to take branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook and rejoice before God. To this day, Jews in synagogues hold in their hands a lulav, the frond of a date palm, along with branches of willow and myrtle, as they celebrate the Jewish holiday of Sukkot. These are symbols of praise representing God's name.

The laying down of branches or the waving of palms as Jesus passes symbolizes that God will save the righteous, and they will flourish. As the enthusiastic cheers rise loudly from the people who are longing for liberation and freedom, Jesus knows that when a "crowd hails a new hero, they are also challenging Roman authority."

We see that the Triumphal Entry is a compelling story of hope, redemption and freedom. Most importantly, it is a story of great risk. As his companions and disciples' cheer and chant, they may be remembering Jesus' words to take up the cross and follow him. But that is so risky. They

must be willing to "accept hardships and loss, humiliation and imprisonment, even death, to proclaim a vision of a better world, and then to work for it."

In the book, *The Mustard Seed*, spiritual guru Osho presents an interesting observation about why some Christians continue to cling to the comfort of Jesus as a divine Saviour, rather than follow the dangerous path of the historical Jesus. He contends that "people do not want to go near a person who is enlightened because such a person is dangerous to encounter."

Jesus is dangerous to encounter because he lives a fully aware life; he can see through people, through their lies, masks, pretense, and false images within society, and he requires that his disciples see through the lies, the masks, and the deception as well. Jesus was dangerous because he took risks by challenging the powerful, speaking about overturning oppressive systems, and refusing to compromise his message. He expected that his followers live dangerously as well, to take risks for God.

At this moment, crowds surround Jesus hailing him as their king. But usually, Jesus had few followers because it took tremendous courage to align with his vision of God's kingdom. To be a disciple of Jesus in any century takes audacity because one needs to be fearless in one's passion and ability to speak the truth.

In her book *The Gospel of Mary*, Karen King describes a disciple as a person willing to undermine the "domination of the powers that be by refusing to play their game and by offering truth in the place of deception."

Levine writes that we cannot separate the Triumphal Entry from the cross, and the cross cannot be separated from the call of justice. And that call cannot be separated from risk." As followers of Jesus, we are called into "the procession of justice, of compassion, of peace, of a vision of the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom God wants it to be."

As we look at the artwork and now know more of the story, we might ask ourselves, "Where are we? Are we in the parade and shouting "Hosanna!" or are we on the sidelines, afraid to take part? What do we do now? Now, I invite you to talk to each other or to reflect quietly. What do you see in the picture? Does it shed light on your experience as a person of faith and a follower of Jesus?"

In the worship guide there is a take-home page for you to continue to engage in some personal reflection on this story and how you live it in your lives. Next week we enter the passion of Jesus as he passionately disrupts the activities of the Temple. We will section off a scene, we will look long into a face, to see what we can see, to know what we can know. Amen.