

Zechariah 9:9-11 ~ Matthew 21:1-11

Entering the Passion of Jesus: To Jerusalem and Beyond

March 17, 2019 ~ Lenten Sermon Series 1st of 5:

Jerusalem Bound: Save Us, Please! Risking Reputation

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Introduction to Scripture:

It may seem strange to begin a Lenten sermon series with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Isn't this the story we usually hear on Palm Sunday? Talk about rushing the season. Yes, Palm Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week, which is also called the Passion. We will celebrate that day in four weeks, on April 14. However, this Lent, it is my hope and prayer that when we begin our Holy Week on April 14, we will do so with a deeper understanding of what Jesus' Passion calls us to be and do: as individuals and as the body of Christ we call FPC.

Jesus' Passion is a pivotal week in the life of our faith, chock full of stories that involve history and risk. Stories that help us understand Jesus and our faith in a way that nothing else can: Risks that Jesus took and the risks that his disciples and followers took as well. Inspired and guided by Amy-Jill (or A-J, as she likes to be called) Levine's recent book, *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginners Guide to Holy Week* we will dig in and plummet more deeply these stories of Jesus' final week than we could ever do if we waited until Palm Sunday to get started. These scriptures are, familiar territory for some of you, and new to others. However, I am sure that Dr. Levine's insights as a Jewish New Testament scholar will open doors for us all. Sometimes opening a door – say to a closet you haven't opened in a while - can be risky business. But this is the season, my friends. Let the doors of discovery and of spring cleaning, begin!

Why this series this Lent? These stories about the things Jesus did and said during his last week on earth ring with a clarion call we need to hear. Risks for righteousness sake are the very ones that can start to melt the divisions and the hate that are threatening the fabric of our hurting nation and struggling world. After today's parade, the fanfare fades and the Passion backdrop beckons us to ask hard questions. Questions like: "What *do* we stand for? What kind of risks are we willing to take up? What should I begin doing that I have not yet been able to?"

Let's turn our attention to the scene at hand. We don't want to miss the parade: The carefully orchestrated, freely chosen turn that Jesus took in the 21st chapter of Matthew.

Sermon:

What does success look like to you? Do we know it when we see it? As Christ followers, this story throws up images we may find hard to recognize in our popular lexicon of success. A rag tag crowd throwing their own clothes, and green branches they have cut from nearby trees, with Jesus riding on a donkey? No brass bands in front of Jesus or "Dairy Days" floats behind throwing out candy and cheese. No, instead Jesus is surrounded by a chorus of voices shouting, "Hosanna! Hosanna to the Son of David, Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Jesus' choice to ride a donkey into Jerusalem, and the crowd's cries of, "Hosanna" offer more than enough gospel truth for us today about success, Jesus-style. The donkey and the word "Hosanna" give us a sight and a sound I hope we will all take home with us today. Let's start with the donkey. Yes, the one donkey, not two, as today's gospel writer Matthew's version of this story suggests. Matthew, more than any of the other Gospel writers eagerly connects Jesus' words and actions with the prophecies and teaching of the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Bible. Matthew wants to connect the dots to show that Jesus is the long-awaited, long-expected Messiah. Today's story is a prime example.

You can see in Matthew 21:4, he writes, "This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet." He is referring specifically to the oracle found in Zechariah 9:9, which is the first verse of our Old Testament lesson this morning. Take a look in your bulletin and you can see for yourself how Matthew took the poetic doubling in verse 9, "he is humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey", and turned Jesus donkey into two animals, in Matthew 21:5-6. I point this out in case you were wondering how Jesus somehow was able to ride a donkey and its colt at the same time. Wonder no longer: he did not perform some sort of circus maneuver that day. And secondly, to point out one of clear example where we see in our biblical text human slippage that occurred somewhere along the line from the oral tradition, the writing, the translating to us in our holy Bible. This makes it no less holy, but rather more, in our Presbyterian view. God's divine and eternal truth, shining through the human hearts, souls, and hands that worked together to produce the written text we have in our hands today.

Why would the King of Kings choose a donkey as his mode of transport to make his final entry into Jerusalem? There are many reasons starting with this one: He was fulfilling prophecy. Did you know that Princes of Israel rode on donkeys since the time of Judges? Here again, Rabbi Prophet Jesus was building on established tradition even in his choice of vehicle. And he was punching up this tradition with his own added twist of meaning. Jesus was riding into Jerusalem on a donkey because he was willing to risk capital punishment on a cross to show us what he was saving us from. And to show us what he was saving us for. He offered up an unforgettable visual image that day of what success in God's eyes looks like. What part of riding on a donkey don't we get?

Yes: Jesus was offering an alternative vision of success, for the crowd that day and for us, that turns on the word "triumphant." Zechariah writes, "Triumphant and victorious is he, riding on a donkey." What, pray tell, is triumphant about a donkey? Or about being nailed to a cross? We find it in the root of the word translated here as "triumphant" which comes from the the Hebrew word for "righteous" or in right relationship with God. So being triumphant, being successful in God's realm is all about being in right relationship with God. Do you want to be free from the lesser gods and the trappings of "success" flashed on our screens, on our TV's? It's not about gold medals, getting into the most selective college, or being the most popular, the most attractive, or the wealthiest. Rather, it's about listening to, and being in sync with the One who came to save us all. It's about following God's will no matter the cost. We will get back into this in a big way with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, where we see even Jesus struggling with this vision of success

For today, it's about getting off our high horse, and placing our bets on the winning horse who is not Pontius Pilate strutting into Jerusalem for the Jewish high holy days on his stallion with the brass bands on the other side of town. Pontius Pilate's display, up high and mighty on his tall horse, was to remind the crowds that Rome is in charge and they are not. For today, it's about seeing the folly of the high horse, and recalibrating success as measured by our right relationship with God. The One who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, to show us that God's way, is the way of humility.

"Hosanna" literally means: "Save, Please!" Jesus is saying something like this, to them and to us: "I am saving you, can't you see? I am saving you from your self-serving ways of "me first." I am saving you from your worst self. I am saving you from the parade that leads to death where there is no resurrection. My way of salvation depends on self-emptying. You want to be saved? Be humble." Let's be clear what we mean by humble here. Humble, as A-J has written, "not in the sense of lowly, but in the sense of being able to listen to others, to share resources, to prioritize community rather than authority, to be served, rather than to serve." ⁱⁱ

Jesus had a choice. He did not have to go up to Jerusalem where he knew he would die. The parade that he planned and executed leads directly to the cross. His cross, that saves us all. He had told his followers earlier that if they wanted to be his followers, they must deny themselves and take up their cross. It is important to remember that when Jesus said this to his followers, "taking up your cross" had an explicitly political meaning. To take up the cross meant to risk Roman capital punishment. In other words, to take up the cross meant to be willing to accept hardship, loss, humiliation in order to proclaim a vision of a better world. As A-J has written, "The Triumphal entry cannot be separated from the cross, and the cross cannot be separated from the call of justice. And that call cannot be separated from risk, personal, professional, permanent." ⁱⁱⁱ

God gives us that choice, too. What model of success do we operate under? Who or what calls the shots in our day-to-day decisions? Do we trust the power of God we cannot see, over the powers that we can see? If "triumphant" means being righteous and just, if being righteous and just means following God's will rather than ours, here's the thing today's parade paints in vivid color: Success has nothing to do with being "king of the mountain" by wiping out all opponents—Success means putting it all out there in the name of self-giving love, justice. Yes, taking up our cross. It starts with letting Jesus save us from our worst selves. Every day.

Just this past Friday, March 15, the whole world witnessed a person display his absolutely worse self with a horrific spray of bullets, killing at least 50 people and wounding another 50 while they were at prayer in two mosques in Christ Church, New Zealand. The whole world was able to see it, because he chose to post his horrific atrocity on Facebook. This was an act of deliberate terror, fueled by racist hatred, done in the name of white supremacy. And Jesus wept. Again. I believe we are all feeling, all reeling from the pain in the world this week. I I I hear Jesus calling us. I hear him calling again from his donkey, beckoning us to take a risk in

the name of justice. Jesus calling for us to throw our best against the force of hatred and hubris that is killing innocent people all over the world.

We, at FPC, belong to an interfaith group named, “NAOMI” whose purpose is to link arms across faith traditions in the name of compassion and justice for all God’s people. Currently NAOMI is drafting a Mission Statement written by Rabbi Ed Boraz, of the Mt. Sinai Congregation in Wausau, that was inspired by the group after the Tree of Life shooting in Pittsburgh. At their Temple in Wausau there was outpouring of support, an encouraging flurry of discussion among different groups united around the need to respond, the need to enter Jerusalem, to enter Christ’s passion if you will, to address the causes of this troubling proliferation of mass shootings. We met on February 28 to discuss this Mission Statement. And then the shooting in New Zealand happened.

I feel moved to share with you excerpts from this statement, from its rationale and pledge to action. It articulates a risk I hear Jesus calling us to take at a time such as this.

We, the undersigned, representing our duly respected Houses of Worship, express our deepest concerns over the growing violence in our country that has resulted in mass shootings in some of our most venerable institutions. These include houses of worship, schools, and public forums. After much discussion and reflection, we believe that we have identified four factors in these ongoing tragedies that plague our country. These include:

1. Those suffering from mental illness...
2. The discourse of our public figures and its spread in news and social media, can influence one already on the fringes of society to commit an act or acts of violence against the innocent...
4. The need for discourse among the disparate groups that comprise our great society, so as to promote a deeper understanding of our common humanity and to appreciate and to embrace our differences as well.

We recognize that we will never be able to eradicate violence from our society. But our respective faiths call on us to use our resources to do everything humanly possible to reduce these incidences through understanding and through love of one another.

Therefore, we pledge to work together in developing and implementing concrete steps that will address each of these factors, as well as others that may be identified... We will urge our politicians through various means to act with respect and dignity in discussing and addressing the great issues of our time. We will denounce the use of language that is inflammatory and hurtful...

And finally, we will work together to create inter-faith groups whose purpose will be to promote understanding, acceptance, and love of one another and our respective spiritual pathways...”^{iv}

Another bad day for us as a country was the day we started separating immigrant children from their parents at the border. I believe that was a day that we were at our worst self as a country. Now we need Jesus to “Hosanna” our way of this mess, as well. Our Immigrant Action Team has started a campaign with our RENIR bracelets to raise awareness and advocacy aimed at reuniting these families. We will not stop until all are reunited. It’s slow work, it’s quiet work: one conversation at a time, one phone call to our elected officials, one donation to our “One Great Hour of Sharing” and other organizations offering legal help and support to reunite these families.

We need to get off our high horses and slide onto our donkeys. Success will happen when we do this. This year, let's enter together into "One Great Lent of Risking". Risking, Jesus-style. Yes, letting Jesus save us from our worst selves. Hosanna! What is holding us back?

ⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 2018).

ⁱⁱ Ibid, 28.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, 36.

^{iv} NAOMI, Draft Mission Statement, February 28, 2019