

Entering the Passion of Jesus

“The Parade: Risking Reputation”

[Matthew 21:1-11](#)

The events of Christ’s Passion, which take place during the last several days of Jesus’ life, are important to our faith journey and identity as followers of Jesus. Yet, they do not receive enough attention because we quickly move from the celebration of Palm Sunday to the celebration of Easter Sunday, skipping what happens in-between.

For the 6 Sundays of this Lenten season, inspired by Amy-Jill Levine’s book, *Entering the Passion of Jesus*, we will freeze-frame moments in Jesus’ final days and closely look at them, learning the history behind them. Through the stories of Jesus’ trials and the risks that he chose to take, we will seek to understand and question our own lives and so grow deeper relationships with him, with those around us, and the world.

We start the series with the first story of Holy Week — Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. All 4 Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John record this story, each with a different emphasis and mention of specific details (Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-44; John 12:12-19). Today, we will consider Matthew’s version, and I invite you to read the other three accounts on your own later during the week and find out what message each seeks to convey.

In their book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Teach about Jesus’ Final Days in Jerusalem*, Biblical scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write, “Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30.” One was from the east, largely composed of peasants, following Jesus from Galilee, who was riding a donkey down the Mount of Olives. On the other side of the city, from the west, came the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, entering the city in a military parade with his entourage — war horse, chariot, and weapons.

The city of Jerusalem had about 40,000 inhabitants, and during Passover, it would swell with as many as 200,000 pilgrims, coming from many different countries and cities for the celebration of Passover, the Feast of Freedom, which celebrated the exodus from Egypt, the end of slavery and the time of God's redemption. Three days before the Jewish festival, Pontius Pilate was making his grand appearance there to remind the Jews that Rome was in charge and that the Roman Empire reigned over Israel (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, p. 153-154).

In stark contrast to this display of power and military might, came Jesus, down from the Mount of Olives, where the Messiah was expected to appear. But, he did not look or act the part. He rides into Jerusalem not on a horse, but a donkey. And he does this to overthrow the imperial concept of the Pax Romana — a false, coercive peace that the Romans maintained by military power. So, Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem riding on the back of a donkey was a protest against the Roman Empire, a symbolic act of resistance and opposition against the spectacle of the Roman governor's military parade. He had been a popular rabbi and miracle worker up until this point. Now, he was risking his reputation. He was stirring up people's hopes and desires for freedom and liberation from foreign occupation.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was not a spontaneous act, but rather a carefully planned move. When he came near Jerusalem, Jesus asked two of his disciples to go into the village to bring him a donkey and a colt that they would find there. If anyone questioned them, they were to simply say, "The Lord needs them." Highly likely, Jesus had some friends and followers in the village, and the animals belonged to one of them. In fact, his close friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, lived in Bethany, just 2 miles from Jerusalem. According to the Gospel of John, Jesus already had been to Jerusalem several times. So, he must have been familiar with the city, and people in the area surely would have known him.

But, why a donkey and a colt? Why did Jesus need two animals? How could he ride on both a donkey and a colt at the same time? Levine finds the answer to these questions in the text itself. The first of the two Old Testament scriptures quoted in the text is from Zechariah, and it uses poetic parallelism, a popular form of Hebrew poetry in which a single object is described in two different ways, the second line enhancing the first. So, Zechariah was not speaking of two animals, but just one. However, Matthew took Zechariah literally when he said, "This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet."

When Jesus entered the city, a huge crowd gathered and spread their clothes on the road while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Here is a quiz for you. Do you notice something missing from the description here? Where are the palm branches? We assume that the branches people were waving were from palm trees. But, Matthew does not specify that they are palms. It simply states, "branches from the trees." Actually, among the 4 Gospels, the only Gospel that specifically mentions "the palms" is John!

Levine points out that the missing palm branches in the Gospel of Matthew can tell us something about ourselves. "We see what we expect to see, and at times these expectations trip us up. We read what *is not* there, and as a result, we fail to see what *is* there. But, the whole message of the Bible, and specifically of the kingdom of heaven, is to see the world otherwise; *as God wants it to be rather than as it is.*"

When we see the world as God wants it to be rather than as it is, we can see new things. That's what I experienced during our recent overseas mission trip. During the first few days after our arrival in Sierra Leone, I saw so much poverty in the nation, and my heart was broken. Seeing run-down buildings and so many people desperately trying to sell anything on the streets everywhere in the city was quite overwhelming. Then, we met the students and staff of AMDCF and also the students and teachers of UMC schools in the province and district. There, while listening to the enthusiastic hymn singing and earnest praying of the students, and the stories of their dedicated teachers and community leaders, I began to see and hear something that I did not before — their gifts and strengths, their faith and resilience, their peace-loving nature and hospitality. As I saw the nation and its people as God would want them to be, I began to see signs of hope and new possibilities!

The world we see now, as it appears, is full of growing fear due to Covid-19, which is fast spreading around the globe. And when we are motivated by fear, we isolate ourselves, worrying about our own needs and our own security. But, the world we see as God wants it to be is full of compassion and care for one another. For those who see the world that way, with eyes of faith, a moment of crisis is not cause for fear and panic, but an opportunity to help, to give, to serve, and to love. How do you see the world? Is it as it appears, or as God wants it to be?

As Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem on a donkey, the crowds going before and after him, shouted out Hosannas. Hosanna is a Hebrew word, and it means “Save or Help, we pray.” The idea of salvation for most of the scriptures in the Old Testament was not about spiritual matters, but physical ones. The Passover was about salvation from slavery. The concept of salvation for the Jews in Jesus’ time was liberation from the Roman occupation and the political restoration of their nation. But Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem was more than a political victory parade. The victory that Jesus came to deliver was something new. It was not just for Israel. It would be available to both Jews *and* Gentiles, to both the oppressed *and* oppressor alike, saints *and* sinners, for Jesus came to save the whole world. And to do this, he came not as a conquering hero, ready to spill the blood of others, but rather as a humble servant, willing to endure humiliation and allow his blood to be spilled on the cross.

Levine asks, “from what do we seek salvation? From sin, yes. But also from pain, from despair, from loneliness, from poverty, from oppression. We are all in need of some form of salvation.” As people of faith from the past did, we still cry out to be saved, and surely, God hears our cries. Yet, are our Hosannas lifted high enough? Are we seeing the new possibilities God is offering? The salvation and restoration of the whole world that the kingdom of God promised? The vision that Jesus Christ was willing to not only risk his reputation but give his life for and invited his disciples to follow, to pick up our own crosses and follow? Or, is our concept of salvation too small, too safe?

Join us next week as we continue walking with Jesus this Lent. We will turn our attention to Jesus in the Temple next Sunday, where he risks righteous anger.