

“LENT: A SEASON OF RISK – RISKING REPUTATION”

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Matthew 21:1-11

(02-21-21) Lent 1

This will be a Lenten season like no other. Besides the fact that we are still not able to meet in person due to the pandemic, we will be journeying through these 40 days of Lent in a different way than we have before. Normally the journey of Lent takes us from the transfiguration of Jesus towards Jerusalem until we finally enter with Jesus on Palm Sunday at the beginning of Holy Week. This year we will be spending all of Lent within the time scope of Holy Week, exploring the texts usually associated with the passion of Jesus. I will be using a resource by Dr. Amy Jill Levine called, *Entering the Passion of Jesus*, as a guide, the same book that we are studying during our bible studies on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

The theme of the book is “RISK,” and it will be the theme of the sermons over these next 6 weeks as we move towards Easter. We will journey with Jesus as he takes up his cross and invites us to do the same if we would follow him. As Levine writes, the risks taken are not only by Jesus, but also by his followers. **Jesus is about to give up his life, which requires determining what a life is worth. And that means we all have to determine what our own lives are worth. What is worth dying for? What is worth living for? What are our values, and have we lived up to them?**¹

Jesus’ last days bring with them several challenges, says Levine. **What do we stand for? What do we believe in? When do we stand up for those beliefs? When have we denied or betrayed? How can we make it right? If someone were to ask us, what is the cross that you’re bearing, what is the cause that you have taken up, how much have you risked, do we know what our answer is?** That’s what it means to enter into Lent, to enter into the passion of Jesus.²

We begin with the account of the entry into Jerusalem. We know that the city is in preparation for the Feast of Passover which marked God’s deliverance of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. The city would be full, with pilgrims having made the journey from all over the world. Jesus and his disciples could have easily joined the throngs as they made their way into the city, unnoticed, not drawing any attention to themselves. But that’s not what Jesus has in mind.

¹ Amy Jill Levine, *Entering into the Passion of Jesus*. p.7

² Levine, p.16

When he and his disciples reached Bethphage, which is just on the other side of the Mount of Olives, which is separated from Jerusalem by the Kidron Valley, he sends a couple of his disciples into the village to get a donkey, and a colt, and to bring them to him. There's an interesting wording in Matthew's gospel that implies that two animals were brought to Jesus and that Jesus sat on both of them, which would be a strange sight! Levine brings clarity to this by noting that Matthew quotes the prophet Zechariah who writes, ***"Lo, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious he is, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."*** (Zech 9:9) What Levine says is that Zechariah is using "poetic parallelism," a popular form of Hebrew poetry in which the second line enhances the first. The donkey is the same as the colt, the foal of a donkey, the second mention is just an enhancement of the first statement. Matthew, in his eagerness to be literally faithful to prophecy, understands Zechariah to mean two animals when really it's only one.

But let's not get distracted any further. The point is that Jesus, instead of entering Jerusalem as one of the crowd, goes to great lengths to stand out, to make sure he's noticed. The donkey is brought to Jesus and he sits on it and this is how he enters Jerusalem. People saw him coming and spread their cloaks on the road and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road as well. Crowds went ahead and followed him, shouting, ***"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"***

Talk about a scene! Why does Jesus do this? Why does he enter Jerusalem so publicly, so prominently? It's a parade, a victory parade actually. Military leaders after a victory would enter a city riding a horse to proclaim their triumph, their power, their authority. In fact, historians have pointed out that at Passover Pontius Pilate, the Roman representative to Judea, would have rode into Jerusalem on a horse, surrounded by Roman soldiers. It was a demonstration of Rome's power and authority over the people of Palestine, a conquered part of their empire. It was a warning and a threat. So here was Jesus, riding into Jerusalem like a conqueror, except he's riding a donkey, not exactly the most intimidating creature you could think of.

But the people, the whole city, was in turmoil, writes Matthew. The crowds shouted, Hosanna, save us, we pray! They called Jesus the Son of David and the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Here's the thing. **Jesus rides into Jerusalem in the way he does and creates huge expectations for the crowd.** Is he the one, he is the messiah? Is he the Son of David, a title that has enormous implications for the people? Jerusalem is known as the city of David, the capital of the great kingdom of Israel. If Jesus is the Son of David, then he's entering into the city to claim it for himself, he is claiming to be the rightful heir. He will liberate the people from the Roman oppressors, he will restore Israel to its rightful place.

To the question, ***“who is this?”*** the crowds replied, ***“this is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”*** That might sound like an innocuous statement, after all that’s where Jesus was from and some considered him a prophet. But Matthew writes this with a purpose that we only see if we understand the full context. Matthew alludes to the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy where God says, ***“I will raise up for them a prophet like (Moses) from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.” (Deut 18:18)*** So not only is Jesus associated with the king predicted in Zechariah, not only is he the Son of David, but he’s also the prophet in the style of Moses whom God will raise up!³ But here’s the problem. **Jesus has raised expectations but in the doing he also has raised the risk to himself.** He has cultivated a reputation throughout his ministry. The issue is that there’s confusion between what Jesus wants to portray and what the people have come to believe about the reputation of this Jesus.

If you read the words of Zechariah that Matthew alludes to, you read that Zechariah prophesizes that, ***“lo, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.”*** Now we read these words, words like triumphant and victorious and we understand them in a certain way. We associate them with competition, usually a military competition. To be triumphant and victorious means you’ve won, you have conquered. But the words don’t mean what we might think they mean. The way Zechariah uses those words, it’s not about military victory or conquest, but rather righteousness and justice. It’s about saving, not conquering. Even the word humble, rather than being understood as meek or gentle, in the way it’s used in Zechariah, it means compassionate, having solidarity with those who are poor or afflicted. **So Zechariah’s king, the king Matthew believes has come in Jesus, sides with the suffering, this king is righteous, not violent, this king is strong in faith, not strong in weapons.**

This is the reputation of the one who rides into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. The crowds would have known that, they should have known that if they knew their scriptures. Jesus rides into Jerusalem and the crowds ask, “Who is this?” They answer that he is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee. **They got the right answer, but they don’t understand.** The crowds who shouted Hosanna, save us we pray, the crowds who declared Jesus to be the Son of David, the one who comes in the name of the Lord, will also cry crucify, crucify! **I asked earlier, why does Jesus do what he does? Why does he enter Jerusalem so publicly, so prominently? Jesus risks his reputation, he risks everything, his very life, entering Jerusalem like he does. But he does because the question has to be asked, “Who is this?”**

It needed to be asked two thousand years ago and it has to be asked today. **And just like the crowds lining the road back then, we also need to know our answer.** Who is this, who is Jesus? **Who is Jesus for you?** Is he our King, the Son of David, the one who comes in the

³ Levine, p.35

name of the Lord? Is he the one who is triumphant, victorious and humble? **And what does that mean for us, for you?** Do we get that Jesus, even as we know that he is victorious over death and over all powers and principalities, do we get that Jesus is about righteousness and justice, do we understand that he's not about defeating our enemies or getting our way? Will we understand that the strength of Jesus is in his mercy, his compassion, his love, not in force, not in fear, not in might?

And when we cry out to Jesus, Hosanna, do we understand that we are asking Jesus to save us, not to conquer our enemies and that in saving us, not only does he save us from our sin, but he also saves us from what ails us in our immediate context? **Yes, we need salvation from sin, but we also need to be saved from our pain, our despair, our loneliness, from poverty, from oppression, from abuse, from so much that ails us, not only spiritually, but physically, holistically.**⁴

And will we also realize that to cry Hosanna is also to align ourselves with the way of Jesus, with the journey of Jesus to the cross, **that to answer that Jesus is our King, that he is our Lord, our Saviour, is to then also risk our reputations to live in the way of Jesus?** How has **the Lordship of Jesus Christ in your life caused you to risk?** And on this Sunday when we meet for our annual congregational meeting, **how has the Lordship of Jesus Christ in our life together as his church caused us to risk our reputation?**

Maybe a better question is do we know what our reputation is? If we're honest, we might not be as comfortable with the answers as we would like to be. Maybe it's time to risk more. Maybe it's time to risk our reputations for being people who don't like to rock to boat, who are just nice, who get along, who don't really want to upend the good thing we've got going. Maybe it's time as a church to risk our reputation as perhaps being unremarkable, unnoticeable, unexceptional. **Maybe it's time to risk more, to follow Jesus more closely, more authentically, whatever that might cost us.**

We're just getting started this Lent, there's still lots to come as we journey with Jesus. **The path will not be easy, for Jesus, or for those who follow, but may we stay the course with him.**

Thanks be to God, Amen.

⁴ Levine, p.32