

St. Paul's United Methodist Church  
2111 Carlton Avenue  
Colorado Springs, CO 80909  
Email: stpaulscs@comcast.net

Phone: 719-634-7046  
Fax: 719-634-4752  
Visit us on the web:  
stpaulsumc-coloradosprings.org



Grounded in Tradition, Growing in Faith



## LENTEN REFLECTIONS 2021

By Pastor Leslie

Influenced by

Entering the Passion of Jesus:

A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week

by author, professor, and biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine

First 4 Days of Lent

## Day 1, February 17<sup>th</sup>

*"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in."*

(Matthew 23:13-14, ESV)

I recently read a blog by Matthew Distefano entitled *Jesus Wasn't Always Nice*. I have to admit, the title first grabbed my attention because it made me feel a little uncomfortable. Early in his blog he writes that, in some peoples' minds, "Jesus was all about love, was all about meeting people where they are at, all about listening and not judging others. And look, to some extent, Jesus was all about those things. Sometimes. And in some contexts. But He was also a rabble-rouser. He wasn't always nice. And I'm guessing He wasn't all that liked by a large group of His contemporaries."<sup>1</sup> This observation made me uneasy, because I recognized myself in it. I DO tend to feel most comfortable with the Jesus who is all about love. The Jesus who meets me on my journey, you on your journey, and those folks over there on their journeys. This is the Jesus that draws me in to a relationship with a loving God. Yet, the very fact that Distefano's words made me squirm a bit, told me that I needed to keep reading. So...I did.

I was reminded that the Jesus that loves me unconditionally, is the same One who, according to Matthew (Ch. 23), lit into the religious leaders - you know, the first century pastors and spiritual teachers - calling them hypocrites, a "brood of vipers," whitewashed tombs. In other words, untrustworthy frauds, dangerous and fake - all shiny on the outside, but a stinking, messy decay on the inside. Ouch.

Then, in Luke 11, He castigates His dinner host, a Pharisee, and another guest, a lawyer. He calls them greedy and wicked. He accuses them of trying to pacify God with paltry tithes, while ignoring what really matters to God...justice and love. He calls out their love of "preening [themselves] in the radiance of public flattery." He derides them for setting people up for failure, loading them "down with rules and regulations, nearly breaking their backs, but never lifting even a finger to help." (Luke 11:46, The Message) He condemns them for having murderous hearts, honoring their ancestors who killed God's prophets rather than the prophets who brought God's Holy Word to the people. On it went. "Woe to you. Woe to you. Woe to you," Jesus repeated over and over. It hardly sounds like the Jesus who meets me on my faith journey, all loving, listening ears and non-judgmental spirit.

What do I do with THIS Jesus? I yearn for the Jesus who sees me in all my brokenness, blindness, deafness, "duh"-ness - and reaches out to me to touch and heal and love. Yet, I can't tuck this other, more challenging, side of Jesus away, out of sight and out of mind, simply because it makes me feel better and more at ease. Understanding Jesus means welcoming the fullness of who He showed *Himself* to be. The Savior who fiercely loves and cares for me yet is determined to challenge me to the point of discomfort in order to shape me into who *I am called* to be.

**John Wesley's Covenant Prayer:** I am no longer my own, but Yours. Put me to what You will, place me with whom You will. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be put to work for You or set aside for You, Praised for You or criticized for You. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and fully surrender all things to Your glory and service. And now, O wonderful and holy God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, You are mine, and I am Yours. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it also be made in heaven.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.patheos.com/blogs/allsetfree/2021/01/jesus-wasnt-always-nice/>

## Day 2, February 18<sup>th</sup>



*"As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me."*

(Matthew 21:1-2, NIV)

My mother was amazing to me in so many ways. She was compassionate. Curious. Tenacious. Gracious. She was my first ... and primary ... spiritual mentor. Her faith was deep and strong. She was a passable cook. An avid reader. A lover of words and relentless grammar-police. And she was a donkey collector.

Now, I could claim that her interest in donkeys was symbolic of her faith. There are, after all, a few significant stories in Scripture that feature donkeys. However, I am pretty sure that it was largely, probably exclusively, due to her being a lifelong

Democrat. I didn't think much about that as a child. All I knew was that it was always a good option for gift-giving.

Dr. Amy-Jill Levine has me thinking about donkeys. She tells of Jesus, standing outside of Jerusalem, about to enter the Holy City for the last time before His crucifixion. He instructs two of His disciples to go and, well, just seize a donkey and colt that are tied in the village. Jesus, Levine suggests, had a plan. Then, she speculates, "When we enter a place where we know we oppose the local leaders, what do we do? What do we say? How do we plan ahead?...If one is going to confront any system that prevents human wholeness—be it poverty, sickness, colonialism or lack of compassion—it helps to have a plan."<sup>2</sup>

I'm not sure that I'm such a great plan-maker. At least, I'm not such a great plan-maker when it comes to entering a place where I oppose the local leaders. Too often, I'm too timid. I may desire to confront systems that prevent human wholeness, yet I also prefer to avoid conflict. I often pray to God, "Lord, help me to know when to speak up, and when to keep my mouth shut." I'm still working on hearing God's leading on that!

Perhaps it's the plan that's important. Having some idea beforehand about how I'm going to act, what I'm going to say, will give me courage to actually act and say things that I am called to act and say. Perhaps that's one of the reasons that Jesus made a plan. It gave Him focus, purpose and yes, even courage.

Since I believe that God understands my emotional struggles and insecurities precisely because Jesus experienced them too on occasion, then I can buy that explanation. It gives me hope that I can continue to grow into who I'm called to be.

When I look at the donkeys that I've kept from Mom's collection it reminds me...make a plan! If Jesus did it...so should I!

**Prayer:** Lord, thank You for understanding me. My timidity. My insecurities. Help me to plan, so I can be a better voice for You.

<sup>2</sup>Levine, Amy-Jill, Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), p26

### Day 3, February 19<sup>th</sup>

*"And going a little farther, He threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what You want."*

(Matthew 26:39, NRSV)

Lent can be a bummer.

40 days replicating Jesus' sacrifice and withdrawal to the wilderness, into our own versions of the wilderness for personal connection through self-reflection, can feel burdensome. This year, however, feels relentless. In fact, it rather feels like we've been stuck in Lent since it began on February 26<sup>th</sup> LAST year. Almost one year. 12 months. 52 weeks of self-sacrifice, withdrawal and isolation. Almost one year of grief. Not even Easter last year, or Advent or Christmas - our biggest seasons of hope - could completely shake off the residual feelings of being stuck in the wilderness.

I suppose, though, that Jesus' 40 days of spiritual grounding in the desert was exactly what He needed to have the fortitude to keep moving forward through the subsequent three years... leading right up to the cross. If anything was an indication of the inner strength that He gained by learning to completely rely on God during those 40 days, it was that emotional moment in the Garden of Gethsemane, right before His arrest. He could have turned aside from His mission right then. He could have escaped the torture. The death.

He wanted to do just that. Escape. *"My father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me."* He knew. The desert was about to turn into a living hell. But He didn't escape. He let come what would come. He made the right choice. He made the hard choice. *"Yet not what I want but what You want."*

As I continue this movement through "official Lent" this year, Amy-Jill Levine reminds me "The stories told [during Lent]...are about the inexorable move to suffering and death. We know what's going to happen, and there's nothing we can do to stop it...Despite the fact that we know there's a resurrection at the end, we still have to go through the horror before we can get to the healing."<sup>3</sup>

Some days, I feel as if my spiritual fortitude has taken more of a beating than a grounding during this "extended" Lenten season. But then again, I'm certain that I haven't spent every minute centering on my need to completely rely on God. I've had plenty of pity moments, plenty of denial moments, plenty of self-talk moments.

Jesus would have me approach things differently. Mentally and emotionally, yes. Spiritually, for certain. Even physically. Jesus would remind me how much I gain when I am able to rely on God. He made the right choice. The hard choice. Can I?

For, there's one thing that never changes in the stories. In the end...Resurrection does come.

**Prayer:** May Your journey to the cross remind me that, in time, healing... resurrection...will come.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, Levine, p14



Swanson, John August. *Entry into the City*, from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=56544>. Original source: [www.johnaugustswanson.com](http://www.johnaugustswanson.com) - copyright 1990 by John August Swanson

#### Day 4, February 20<sup>th</sup>

*"...they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and He sat on them."  
(Matthew 21:7, NRSV)*

I've been in a few parades, marching along, playing my flute, with the Pride of the Hornets Marching Band. Once we even marched here, in Colorado. At the beginning of my freshman year, the band came to Colorado for a summer band trip. We marched and played at Elitch Gardens (the *old* Elitch). It was my first trip to Colorado. (I never dreamed then that this would become my home!)

One of the most memorable parades was one that I missed. Every October we marched at the State Fair of Texas. That year, the off-Broadway production of *Camelot*, starring Richard Harris, was playing on stage at the performing arts center at the fair. Problem was, the production was at the same time that the band was scheduled to march. My mother received permission from Mr. Glover, my band director, for me to skip the parade and attend the stage production with her. Great memory!

My parades never held much of a risk. (At the most, twisting an ankle or getting out of step.)

Unlike Jesus. "For Jesus, the risk of riding into Jerusalem in a victory parade is very real... Tensions are running high, as are expectations: of liberation, of freedom, of autonomy."<sup>5</sup> And with His calculated move, His unexpected entrance on the donkey (donkeys?) He draws deliberate attention to himself...even as Pontius Pilate arrives through another gate, in full regalia and with full entourage. What a contrast!

Jesus enters as a king...and yet not as any king that the people - Jewish or Roman alike - had ever seen. His grand-yet-metaphorically-not-grand-at-all entrance stated right up front that His sort of kingship - God's sort of kingship - is totally different than expected. Matthew (and Zechariah, whom Matthew quotes) speaks of a humble king, a righteous King. A king interested in justice and humility in the sense of "being able to listen to others, to share resources, to prioritize community rather than authority, to serve rather than to be served."<sup>6</sup>

By upending the expected modes of kingly behavior, it made His victory parade even more dangerous. He knowingly risked the repercussions from Rome...and He risked His reputation from the very ones who desired a Messiah...only according to their own expectations.

I have my own ideas of Jesus, as well. Sometimes, I too, wish for a kingly Jesus that will swoop in and mop up all my troubles. Gallop in and take charge of the messy chaos of our country and world right now. That isn't, however, what I find in this story of Jesus' mode of entry. I find a God who changes things in ways that don't always make sense to me; that is often much slower and more humble than I would like. I find a God who, sometimes, asks me to march in a different way and be ready to take a risk and trust that the outcome I can't necessarily see, will be the right outcome.

**Prayer:** Meek God, guide me in Your way of humility and justice.



<sup>5</sup>Ibid, Levine, p23

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, p27