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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 Week of Lent

Day 5, February 22nd

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is He, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
(Zechariah 9:9, NRSV)

About a month ago I saw a meme that was posted on Facebook a couple of different times. It was a picture of a homeless man, sitting there distressed and dirty, wrapped in a sleeping bag, and wearing a cap on his head that indicated he was a veteran. The words that came with the image said "Share if you think homeless veterans should be housed before any refugees." No surprise. The responses to those posts were long, diverse and just a little heated.

Personally, I was surprised by the question; even a little disturbed by it. My faith tells me that there should be no ranking. If I want to get nitpicky, when I look to Scripture, I don't recall where it says anything about veterans, prioritizing or not. It does, however, say a great deal about refugees, and how we are supposed to care for them. (The fact that Jesus and His family were poor refugees doesn't escape me.) Nevertheless, I don't think that God would prioritize one "category" of homeless over another. God just asks us to care for the homeless, and our task is to figure out how to do that. *"What I'm interested in seeing you do is: sharing your food with the hungry, inviting the homeless poor into your homes, putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad"* (Isaiah 58:7, The Message).

The risk is...this isn't always a popular way of thinking with a lot of people. Me being me, I usually just stick to my own thoughts and not risk a bunch of "heated responses." But this is Lent...and I'm trying to discern how Jesus asks me to risk understanding God better by understanding Him better, and living better, then, in the way of Jesus.

When he told the story of Jesus sending His disciples off to find the donkey for His "victorious" entrance into Jerusalem for that last week, Matthew quoted the prophet Zechariah. The prophet's meanings shaped Matthew's understanding of Jesus and His actions that day.

As I ponder Jesus standing on the hillside overlooking Jerusalem, waiting on His friends to return, what was He expecting to express with such a parody of a typical kingly entrance? Zechariah's prophecy proclaimed, *"Your king comes to you. Triumphant. Victorious."* This creates a very "kingly" entrance image, to be sure. The problem is, the word that we read as "triumphant" in the NRSV really means, for the original Hebrew audience, "righteous."

"Righteous"...being justified. Right and in alignment with God and the ways of God. Zechariah was interested in justice, bringing people into God's loving mercy...not grand expressions of a conquering hero. This was Jesus' whole game plan. Care, concern, healing...yes, justice...for the homeless. The lost. The broken. The least of these. Whoever they are. As always, there's no ranking in this glimpse of the nature of God in Jesus.

But, how often do I forget such things about Jesus? How often do I want to rank others and their need...or rank my response to it? In addition to repeatedly saying in various ways "The first must become the last in God's Kingdom", Jesus proclaims in many other ways throughout the Gospels (including, as I've now learned, in the subtle teachings of this familiar scene), God's broad, expansive love and compassion, grace and mercy. Not just love and compassion, grace and mercy to those with whom I best relate...but to everyone.

Prayer: Lord of justice and humble care, wrap me in Your loving spirit, so that I may be an expression of You in my hurting world.

Day 6, February 23rd



"This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: "Say to Daughter Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

(Matthew 21:4-5, NIV)

My parishioner stood looking at me, her body tense. Her face tight with anger. Clearly, she wasn't happy...and she had already made it clear. She wanted me to fix it...this long-held tension, even resentment, that she harbored toward another person at the church. "It's your job. You're the pastor. The shepherd. You're supposed to care for your sheep."

In other words, she wanted me to fight her battles. She wanted me to intervene and tell my other parishioner to straighten up and play nice. The thing is, there was no abuse. No willful, hurtful actions. There was just different approaches. Different personalities. Different perceptions. And some long-simmering disagreements that hadn't healed.

When Matthew quoted Zechariah, to explain how Jesus was fulfilling prophecy by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, he left out a couple of words. He left out "triumphant" (righteous) and "victorious." He chose to bring into sharp focus, instead, Zechariah's other adjective. "Gentle." Or, "humble". For the prophet, and Matthew, Jesus' humbleness was not the sort where He simply thought less of himself. This was the sort of humbleness that expressed being "poor" or "afflicted." Jesus was a king who could relate. Who could understand...who did understand...the plight of the least of these.

Matthew's choice to only use one of Zechariah's adjectives reminds me of how Jesus can connect to me, whenever I am feeling lost or frustrated or just needing someone to understand. Jesus entered Jerusalem "humble," in the sense of, as Amy-Jill Levine writes, "being able to listen to others, to share resources, to prioritize community rather than authority, to serve rather than to be served. All that underlies the words from Zechariah, and Matthew's first-century Jewish audience would have known it."⁷

It's a heady thing to believe that I can be someone's savior. But, it is not realistic. I am no one's savior. There is only one Savior. I listened to my sweet, but angry, parishioner's story. Rather than diving into her anger, or chastising her for holding on to such a grudge for so long, or trying to "fix" things for her, I acknowledged her frustration. Then, I helped her to own her emotions and humbly address them with the other woman. They worked things out in a healthy way.

Sometimes I hold on to things too long until they erupt in emotions. Sometimes my knee jerk reactions are abrasive. Hurtful. My intentions may be good, but my actions aren't always so. I would like to always be as Jesus shows me in this passage...humble. Able to listen to others rather demand center stage. To share resources rather than hoard out of greed or fear. To prioritize community rather than authority. To serve rather than be served. I would like to be humble, but know full well that I need God's help...and sometimes God's grace when it all falls apart.

Prayer: Make my spirit as Your humble Spirit, moment by moment, Gentle One.

¹Levine, Amy-Jill, Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), p27

Day 7, February 24th

He will proclaim peace to the nations...free your prisoners from the waterless pit...

The Lord their God will save His people on that day as a shepherd saves his flock."

(Zechariah 9:10-11 & 16, NIV)

The woman was sitting in her chair beside her hospital bed. Her few belongings were packed up and she was waiting to be discharged. Before she left however, she called the Spiritual Care office and asked if she could see me one more time before she left. I was a little surprised. She wasn't on my assigned floor. I had stopped in briefly a few days before on an impromptu chaplain visit as a back-up for the full-time chaplain who regularly covered that floor. I don't remember the details of that first conversation, though as I recall, it was brief. It was a "stand beside the bed, talk for a few minutes, offer a prayer, wish her well, then leave" sort of visit.

When I entered her room that second time, it quickly became apparent that this was a "pull up the other chair in the room and stay awhile" sort of visit. She just needed someone to listen. Specifically, she needed a female chaplain and, since I had gained a grain of her trust a few days before, she asked for me. She needed to talk, not about her physical reasons for being hospitalized, but about her marital challenges at home. The pain of her relationship was much worse for her.

So, I sat with her. Listened as she poured out her pain and sorrow, her disillusionment and anger. I said very little. I just gave her my time, my attention, my lack of judgment, my care. It wasn't particularly easy. There was a part of me that wanted to heal her wound. Fix her pain. But that fall, I was learning the difficult lesson of how to simply sit with someone in their pain...and how that is, often, the best thing that I can do.

She didn't expect me to fix her challenges, she just needed someone to hear her pain and validate her worth. It was enough. A month or so later, she returned to the hospital...not as a patient...but to say "thank you". Priest Giles Fraser wrote, "When the brilliant Gillian Rose wrote about her battle with cancer in Love's Work, she employed an epigraph from an early 20th-century Russian Orthodox monk, Silouan the Athonite: 'Keep your mind in hell and despair not.' Or, very roughly translated: just hold their hand and let them talk and cry. And don't run away. It's actually much harder than it sounds."²

Amy-Jill Levine points out how Matthew was drawing from Zechariah's vision of "a king who does not lord it over others, but who takes his place with those who are suffering." When I read her words, this memory from my time with that sweet woman comes to mind. It makes me think about how, sometime, all I need, too, is for someone to come and sit with me in my suffering. Someone who will hold sacred space for my pain. What kind of king does this?

Apparently, the sort of King who watched over the city that would soon turn against Him. Yet, still, He would mount the donkey and ride into the pain nevertheless, knowing it was the only way to hold sacred space...and offer healing...for the pain of those who would turn against Him. The only way to hold sacred space...and offer healing...for me.

Prayer: Thank you, Gentle One, for taking Your place in my suffering...and showing me how even my suffering can be Holy Ground.

²Giles Fraser, *We cannot fix people's grief, only sit with them, in their darkness.* <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2016/apr/14/we-cannot-fix-peoples-grief-only-sit-with-them-in-their-darkness>

Day 8, February 25th



A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of Him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (Matthew 21:8-9, NIV)

A few years back, Brian and I - with our dogs Poncho and Jake - headed out to hike the Ouray Perimeter Trail, a five mile loop that rings the beautiful mountain town of Ouray, CO. Up on the southwest point, the trail crosses over the

Canon Creek Gorge via a metal, mesh suspension bridge, offering a view of Box Canon Falls and the creek running some 300 feet below.

Crossing that bridge was spectacular. I was busy looking out and down, enjoying the stunning view literally all around me, when I bumped into Poncho. It was at that moment that I learned that dogs can be afraid of heights. He had made it out to the middle of the bridge when he looked down, saw the 300' drop beneath him, and froze, legs splayed and rigid. "Go on, P," I said. He didn't move. I gently bumped his rear end with my hiking pole. "Go on. It's ok." Nothing. He wasn't moving. Hikers were lining up behind us. Finally, Brian leaned down, picked Poncho up, carried him to the other side of the bridge, then put him down on solid dirt (or rock, as the case may be), where he happily continued the hike.

Poncho had trotted onto that bridge, as sure of his footing as he had been on the rocky trail behind him. When his eyes looked down, he expected to see solid ground beneath his feet. When, instead, he saw through the holes of the bridge to the bottom of the gorge so far below, the sturdiness of the metal meant nothing. The long drop to the bottom was all he could focus on, and it terrified him.

When Matthew writes about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, I read about the cloaks, spread on the road before Him. I read about cut branches spread on the road with the cloaks. I read about crowds shouting "Hosannah." I expect to read about those same crowds waving palm branches as they shouted and sang in celebration. My brain wants to write those palm branches into the story. But there are simply no palm branches. (Those only show up in John's Gospel.)

Not such a big deal, perhaps. However, as Amy-Jill Levine points out, it's easy to read scripture with preconceived ideas of what is there, "imposing our own concerns—or palm branches—on it rather than allow ourselves to be challenged by the actual words of the story."

So often, I want to believe that I understand Jesus. I expect to see certain things when I read the stories in Scripture about Him. So, I overlay my expectations with the story and get out of it exactly what I suppose that I will. I see what *isn't* there and fail to see what *is* there. When I do that, I limit Jesus...and therefore I limit God. Consequently, faith aside, I prevent myself from being challenged by Jesus in ways that are important. I keep a safe veil between God and me, avoiding the chance to live in the Kingdom of Heaven as fully as God desires for me to do. Perhaps that just feels too risky...like a 300' drop to something I can't quite see. Sometimes, Jesus just needs to pick me up and carry me.

Prayer: Help me to see what You want me to see about You, Holy One. Tap me and tell me "It's ok." And if I still refuse to budge...pick me up. Please. I don't want to miss what You have to show me. I don't want to miss You.

Day 9, February 26th

The crowds that went ahead of Him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"
(Matthew 21:9, The Message)

Soon, my church will celebrate Palm Sunday. Soon, it will turn into one more year where, more than likely, the excited gathering of the children, palm branches in hand, will be silent. Their march to *Hosannah, Loud Hosannah* will likely be a memory - a hymn played without the marching children - rather than a live action expression of praise. The pandemic hangs on.

Matthew told of that first march (minus the palm branches). He told of the people shouting and singing "Hosannah!" By putting this word in their mouths, Matthew draws on Psalm 118, one of the Hallel Psalms...or, Hallelujah Psalms. (*Hallel* means "to praise".)

Hosannah, on the other hand, means "Save! Please!" When I was a child, holding those palm branches and loudly singing that happy song, *Hosannah, Loud Hosannah*, all I understood was that Palm Sunday was a day to celebrate a victorious parade, as Jesus entered the Holy City for His final week, being hailed as God's Sent One. To be honest, I probably thought that to be the case for several years beyond my childhood. I didn't understand then that their song was as much a cry for salvation, as it was a cry of celebration. There was desperation in their shouts and singing.

Knowing this, it forces me to think of how my cries, which often come in the form of praise, are often, at the same time, pleading for salvation. There have been many times...and honestly, will be many more...when my lips proclaim "God is good, all the time, all the time God is good. But God...please help! Please see! Please save!" There have been, and will be, times when God's silence seems louder than God's saving presence. Honestly, during this difficult stretch caused by COVID, it often feels like I'm in one of those times.

Amy-Jill Levine points out, "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. Indeed, the idea of salvation for most of the Scriptures of Israel is not about spiritual matters, but physical ones."⁵

That brings me comfort, actually. It makes me think that the same One who entered the city amid the shouting and singing of "Hosannah!" is the same One who earlier promised "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace." (Matthew 11:28-30, The Message). I love that. "Learn the unforced rhythms of grace." I'm reminded. God is praised any time I approach and offer my whole self, whether joyously thankful or weary, stressed and at the end of my rope.

Prayer: Lord of my heart, receive my *hosannahs*...my cries of thanks and of need... as my gift of praise, of trust, of self.



⁵Ibid, Levine, p31

Day 10, February 27th

"The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. The Lord has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad."
(Psalm 118: 22-24, NIV)

By the time I began my senior year of high school, I could hardly wait for the school year to end. I was chomping at the bit to leave home. Start the new phase of my life. Shake off the old perceptions of who I was and figure out and claim who I was meant to be. (I never dreamed that would be a lifetime of "figuring out".) I was ecstatic when graduation finally arrived. Within a week I left home and moved to Houston to live with my sister for the summer. From there I went straight to college in Austin. From there, I left to get married to Brian and moved to Colorado.

At that point, the changes became less in distance, but I was always anticipating changes, nevertheless. Buy a house. Finish college. Get a "real" job. Begin a family. During those days it seemed as if I was always looking forward to what was around the bend. While life is certainly settled, in some ways, my thoughts can still be up ahead, in the future.

Packed into his telling of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, Matthew describes the shouting, singing and celebratory crowd that both went before and followed Jesus through the Golden Gate and into the city of Jerusalem that portentous day. He paints a picture of a people craving the saving actions of a long-yearned for Messiah. A longing that had been going on since Zechariah's writings at the time of the Babylonian Exile. Here, Matthew places the words and allusions to Psalm 118 in the songs of the joyous crowds during the procession through the gate. Words that long for a future salvation...hopefully, they dared to dream, a salvation that was near at hand.

As Amy-Jill Levine points out, however, the psalms they quoted as they shouted and sang weren't just psalms about some future event. They were songs of thanks for God's saving actions that had already taken place. "Psalms not only ask for salvation" Levine writes. "They also show that salvation is in a sense already present. We don't have to pin all our hopes on a hero and invest all our yearnings toward some future date. This is the day for rejoicing; any time the psalm is sung, this is the day. The kingdom of heaven is present here, if we just pay attention."¹¹

Even now, there are "what-if's" and "should I plan for that" and "I can't wait for such and such to happen" rolling around in my head. The Apostle Paul once wrote *"I've learned to be content in all my circumstances."* (Philippians 4:11, NIV) I'm apparently not as "right-now" focused as Paul. I think I need to learn a little from his playbook. I think I need to sing a few psalms. I think I need to remember that God is God of my yesterdays and my tomorrows...but has blessed me with more than I could ever ask for today. Hallelujah!

Prayer: Lord, help me to realize that You are right here, right now...at every moment in time. That is enough.

⁵Ibid, Levine, p32

