

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Lent is the season of the church year where for forty days (not counting Sundays), Christians talk about Jesus' journey to the cross. During Lent we have the opportunity to think about our lives alongside the life of Jesus, inviting both inward transformation and outward action. "We know what's about to happen, and there's nothing we can do to stop it. Jesus announced his Passion- his crucifixion on a cross- clearly, three times in the Gospels. His followers didn't believe him. We don't want to believe him either" (A.J. Levine, *Entering The Passion of Jesus*). For the six weeks of this year's Lent we're going to do something a little different. With the help of Jewish NT scholar, A.J. Levine, we're going to explore a beginner's guide to Holy Week or the Passion Week, which is the last week of Jesus' earthly ministry and life. Holy Week begins each year on the sixth Sunday of Lent called Palm Sunday... and concludes 7 days later with Resurrection Sunday or Easter. This year our preaching series for Lent *will take an extended view of Holy Week*, as we enter the passion of Jesus. This means for the six Sundays in Lent, we will be looking at the events that happened in the last week of Jesus' life. We will journey through Jesus' Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem to his prayerful agony in Gethsemane. We will participate with Jesus as he takes lots of risks. "During Lent we should ask ourselves, what should I have done that I did not do? What risk should I have taken that I was afraid to take? When did my sense of self-preservation trump my sense of courage? Jesus not only takes up his own cross, he also called his disciples saying, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me' (Mark 8:34). Jesus talks about taking up the cross. The Passion narrative shows him doing just that. Yes, the Passion narrative asks much of us, and it also, through Jesus' example, gives us the knowledge that we can do

what is asked of us, and we are given the assurance that we will succeed” (Levine). One takes a risk when one says, “I am a follower of Jesus; one takes a greater risk by *acting on that definition*. Jesus is about to give up his life, which requires determining what a life is worth. What is worth dying for? What is worth living for? “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” (Levine). We’ve got to go through Friday to get to Sunday, but Sunday’s always coming! So together this Lent we will enter into the Passion of Jesus- not just the week before Easter as is the norm- but for the next six weeks, and this morning we start with Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem- a justice parade- a party. Today we’re going to look at how Jesus risks reputation through not just his words but also through his actions. So before we turn to God’s word for us this day, let us first pray.

**PRAY. READ.**

The triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, the Holy City, the City of David, which is occupied by Rome. Jesus’ triumphal entry is often celebrated on Palm Sunday- the Sunday before Easter. You know when we wave the palm branches and shout, “Hosanna,” which is a reference to Psalm 118, and means ‘Save, please’ or ‘Save, we pray’! Upon Jesus’ parade into Jerusalem begins his Passion. “It also begins a story of tragedy and triumph that should inspire, provoke, and challenge each of us. We know how the story goes: in less than a week after this grand entry parade, the crowds are calling for Jesus’ death” (Levine). There are four versions of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem- all celebrating Jesus coming into his own city. That means that each of the Gospel writers give their own version, each emphasizing different things. No one Gospel tells the full story. In Matthew’s

version we find no palm branches- that's in John's version; however, there is a reference to branches here in Matthew, but we don't know what kind. "Isn't it interesting that we see what we expect to see and at times these expectations trip us up. The entire 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 it is" (Levine). Matthew's version of this story focuses, rather, on prophecies and characters from the Scriptures of Israel- what we call the Old Testament. One example is the donkey and the colt. Jesus sends two of his followers into the village ahead to untie them and bring them to him. Jesus must have had some friends hooking him up. Regardless, according to Matthew, the obtaining of the donkey 'took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet saying, 'Tell the daughter of Zion, look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey'. When a Gospel text cites from the Old Testament (and Matthew does this a lot), our readings are enhanced when we look at the full context of those citations. Zechariah offers this idea of a king who does not lord it over others but who is humble and takes his place with those who are suffering. "Zechariah speaks of a king who is righteous rather than violent. A king who is strong in faith, not armed to the teeth. A king that is victorious, which literally in Hebrew means 'saved.' It comes from the same root as the word 'hosanna' and the names Hosea, Joshua, and yes, Jesus" (Levine). In Greek it means, "savior," And the prophet Isaiah, in 62:11, to which Matthew also alludes, says, "Say to daughter Zion...see, your salvation comes." Here "Matthew is cluing us in: not only is the time of redemption coming, it is coming with the assurance that God is faithful to the covenants. The Triumphal entry anticipates the Last Supper. If we look at Zechariah's full prophecy we see that for Zechariah

and for Jesus, the focus is not on militaristic conquering, but on the power of justice” (Levine), upending Roman oppressive systems.

“For Jesus, the risk of riding into Jerusalem in a victory parade is very real. Pontius Pilate is also making an appearance as he comes, with his entourage, into Jerusalem to tell the Jewish people celebrating Passover that Rome is in charge. And Jesus’ entry calls attention to himself in a major way. Tensions are running high, as are expectations. As Jesus enters into town on a donkey with the crowd crying out to him, “Hosanna! Save, please,” the Passion begins” (Levine). How do we continue to cry out, seeking salvation? All of us are in need of some form of salvation, but a shaky, fickle crowd is not a stable one. Remember that as Jesus is entering Jerusalem through one end of town on a donkey with the crowds from Nazareth in Galilee, so too Pilate is entering Jerusalem through another gate with his soliders. The confrontation is inevitable. At the time of Jesus, taking up one’s cross meant to risk Roman capital punishment. It meant being willing to accept hardships and loss, humiliation and imprisonment, even death, in order to claim a vision of a better world, a divine kingdom, and then to work for it. 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” (Levine). So do we stand on the sidelines of Jesus’ justice parade afraid but shouting from where we’re comfortable or do we risk our reputations, like Jesus, and join Jesus while we shout “Save, please” in the procession of justice, compassion, peace, and vision of the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom as God wants it to be, even here on earth?

Some of you may have watched the Super Bowl ads, while for others of you, you didn't care to watch or it was impossible to even have access the game. For those who missed it, there were a few Jesus ads that were extremely controversial, especially among Christians. There were those who thought it was sinful to spend SO much money on two 30-second ads when there are people who are hungry and unhoused in our city and country. Others were angry about who the funders of this "He Gets Us" campaign were and how non-transparent they were. Still other Christians were really angry that one of the ads- the footwashing one- had Jesus washing the feet of a woman at an abortion clinic and of a gay man. My question is how many watching even knew that the practice of footwashing comes from John 13, which we'll get to later in Lent? In an article from the New York Times this week, the author ([link](#)) shared that the best explanation he "heard for the ad came from Kaitlyn Schiess, a Christian writer and speaker. She argued that the ad might had been directed toward Christians asking, "Are you willing to be shamed for your associations?" In other words, are you willing to risk shame and isolation for loving those on the other side of the political and religious aisle? Are you, like Jesus, willing to love others even if it causes people to hate you? Are you willing to love others even if they haven't repented of what you believe to be grievous sins?" ([link](#)). Maybe the message is "Christians, stop doing the things you are or aren't doing that aren't representative of Jesus!" The real takeaway is that Jesus loves people to the point that He doesn't care about his own reputation. That is what we are to emulate. Remember that Jesus was actually hated for the amount of time he spent with the despised and the marginalized. In Matthew 9, for example, the Pharisees angrily asked Jesus' disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" My question for all of us is "Are we willing to

take up our cross and die to ourselves to the point where we do not care what people think about us? Whether it's associating with the lowly or those on the opposite side of the political spectrum, we're called to love and not judge. When it comes to choosing to follow Jesus, surrendering our reputation is what we're called to do. So let's not rush from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday this year. Instead, let's take the time for Lent to do its work.

Sociologist and Professor Tony Campolo made a huge impression on me as a young adult when I heard him speak. He was speaking and then he cursed and said, "What's sad as Christians is that you all are more shocked by my cursing than you are and care about the fact that I just told you that there are millions of people starving all over the world at this very moment." The New York Times columnist writing the article about these Super Bowl ads shares that he, too, was shaped in his Christian faith by hearing Tony Campolo speak. He shares the story he remembers Tony telling. "Tony was eating out very late in an all-night diner when a group of women who were obviously prostitutes came inside. One of the women, named Agnes, said her birthday was the next day and observed that she'd never had a birthday party in her life. Tony overheard the conversation and asked a man behind the counter if the women came in every night. He said yes. The next night, Tony brought some simple birthday decorations, hung them up and threw Agnes a surprise party in that diner. She cried tears of joy and ended up taking the cake home, untouched. It was the first birthday cake she had ever received. After she left, he prayed with the people who remained in the diner, and one of the employees asked him what kind of church he belonged to. Campolo's answer was perfect: He said he belonged to the kind of church that

gives a party for a prostitute at 3:30 a.m. Not, obviously, because he approved of prostitution. But because he cared for Agnes. He threw that party for her **before** he knew how she'd respond, **before** he knew whether she'd leave the streets and before he'd had a chance to say anything at all to her about Jesus. The party itself spoke to her more loudly than any words could have" ([link](#)). Tony obviously decided to join the party-the parade.

The New York Times writer said it better than me when he concluded the article with these words. "I still don't know how I feel about spending so much money on a Super Bowl ad about Jesus. But I do know that its message is vitally important. Many of the "He Gets Us" ads show how Jesus shared our experiences and knows our suffering. But the Super Bowl ad did something different and more provocative. Instead of telling our nation, "He Gets Us," it essentially asks American Christians, do we get him" ([link](#))? And then we remember that this "parade into Jerusalem, with all the hype and hope, leads directly to the cross. Jesus, the meek king, offers a different path to victory than that of the typical conquering hero. The blood that will be spilled, the life that will be taken, will be his own" (Levine). Are we willing to risk our reputations to follow this Jesus? If so, we've got some emulating to do! Because when a friend comes to us and says, "'What is the cross that you're bearing? How much have you risked?,' do we know what our answer is? That's entering Lent. That's entering the Passion" (Levine). Let us walk jump into Jesus' parade of justice together! Amen.