

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
March 1, 2020
Entering the Passion of Jesus: Picturing Ourselves in the Story
Lent 1: The Parade: Risking Reputation
Scripture: Zechariah 9:9-10
Matthew 21:1-11

Riding on a donkey! That would have been a surprise to many – as it was to our fictional observer. A king or someone in power would be expected to come riding into the city on a horse – a great steed. Indeed, in all likelihood, there was at least one other parade entering the city that day – one that was led by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. His parade would have had soldiers and weapons. It would have been a show of power and might.

Quite likely those observing that parade would have been very quiet knowing why the soldiers were there. It was the feast of Passover – a very important feast for the Jewish people. The population of Jerusalem would increase several times over as faithful Jewish men and women came with their families to worship and celebrate in Jerusalem.

It marked their freedom from Egypt – and for the Romans there was always concern that this would be the occasion when the Jewish people would decide to revolt against Rome, or at the very least incite some riots. Many commentators agree that Jesus entry into Jerusalem that day was designed to be a demonstration against Roman authority.

The people who accompanied Jesus were mostly peasants. They were hard working people who looked and hoped for the day when Rome would no longer dominate. They were waiting and hoping for the Messiah, the one who would come and save them.

In 21st century United States, we like to think of this parade as Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We hear the crowd and join in singing "Hosanna" but we might not know or remember that "Hosanna" means "Save Us". The crowd calls, "Hosanna" or "Save us" "Son of David".

Make no mistake about it, it was dangerous for Jesus to come into Jerusalem and to have people call out to him as the Son of David. As Amy-Jill Levine in our Lenten study book reminds us, "Rome's agents, including the governor, Pontius Pilate, recognize that when the crowds hail a new hero, they are also challenging Roman authority."ⁱ

As we heard earlier in the reading from the prophet Zechariah, there would come a time when a conquering king would come into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. In the history of Judaism, long before Rome came into the picture, King David had ridden on a donkey. The terrain of the area was rocky and hilly, and donkeys could handle this rough terrain better than horses. It's also a dry climate, and the donkey could travel farther on less water. The donkey was a much more practical animal than a horse for most purposes.

For David there was another reason to ride a donkey. Donkeys were considered humble beasts and David was the shepherd boy who became king. Following David, the kings of Israel rode donkeys to identify with David.

Let's also not forget that most travel was done by foot. This is the only place in the Bible where we hear about Jesus riding or requesting a ride. Jesus was making a statement that day – a dangerous one – one that would be one more step along the path that would lead to his death 5 days later.

But what about that crowd? What about our fictional observer?
Where would we be in that crowd?

Perhaps we would be like our friend here. Curious. Wanting to know more but also afraid. Afraid of what it might mean to be in the crowd. Afraid that the soldiers would see and remember who you are. Afraid that you might be arrested or labelled as a rebel. Afraid that your reputation might be ruined.

Maybe you'd be afraid that the crowd would turn dangerous, that someone might start something and before you knew it there would be a riot and you'd be caught in the middle. Maybe you'd be afraid that one of the soldiers or someone else might decide to go on the offensive. If we are honest, today many of us are afraid that in a large political rally or a demonstration of some sort – someone from the opposing side will decide to open fire. We've seen it happen and maybe we don't want to take the chance.

Maybe like our observer, we'd be where we could see, but far enough away that we could run away, escape if we needed to. As he said, "If trouble starts, I'm outta here!"

If you went to a rally or demonstration would you be afraid that someone you know might see you from a distance – maybe your boss, your neighbor, someone who you know doesn't agree with you. Would you be concerned that being seen might affect your job or your reputation?

Would you look eagerly around the crowd to see if you knew anyone – someone who you didn't know agreed with your perspective, someone who might become a companion or an ally?

If Jesus were to come today, would we be more comfortable sitting at home watching on tv so that no one knows what we are doing, and we can

admire from afar? Or would we be on the outer border of the crowd ready to escape if we thought it prudent? Would we be right in the center, pressed in by the crowd, there for the duration, ready to sing when people sang, pray when people prayed, shout when they shouted? Might we be part of the set-up crew, the group that traveled with him every day? Would we be the press secretary speaking out?

It might be interesting to think about where we would be if we were in Jerusalem that day. Where would you be in the picture? On the roof, out on the street, in the middle of the crowd, a soldier watching carefully or home where it is safer?

Each week during Lent, we are going to be looking at one of the events during that last week of Jesus earthly life. I invite all of us to be willing to take a good look – be honest with ourselves about where we are in the crowd. Are we spectators or participants? If we are really honest with ourselves might we discover that we are many people in each situation. We are bystanders, but we are also the persecutors. We are the doubters and also those who are convinced. We are the mourners and also the confused. We are the oppressed but maybe we are also the oppressors.

As we enter into Lent, we enter into the passion of Jesus. You may remember Mel Gibson's 2004 movie "The Passion of the Christ". In this movie, the focus – the passion – is the crucifixion of Jesus. But when we think about the passion of Christ, I would also invite us to think about the things that Jesus was passionate about. We will explore some of those in the next few weeks.

We might ask ourselves if we are passionate about the same things that Jesus was passionate about? What risks are we willing to take to

follow Jesus? As we look inside ourselves, I invite us to do so with compassion for ourselves. It's okay to see ourselves somewhere that is uncomfortable. Lent is a time to be intentional about that inward journey to discover who we really are, even as we continue to discover who's we are.

Marcia McFee in her material for this season, says that we may discover that not only are we “entering the passion” but we are also “entering the compassion’ for all of humanity’s and the earth’s suffering.”ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Levine, Amy-Jill. Entering the Passion of Jesus P. 37

ⁱⁱ McFee, Marcia “Entering the Passion” Worship Design Studio. Sermon fodder.