

# JOURNEYING WITH JESUS TO THE CROSS

Luke 19:28-40  
Psalm 31:9-16  
Isaiah 50:4-9a  
Philippians 2:5-11

Here we are at Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem, the place where the ultimate purpose of his mission is to be fulfilled. We have journeyed with him. We have wanted to listen to him and understand who he is and what he has come to do.

Luke reports some things about these last days differently than the other gospel writers and some things the same.

Notice that the twelve disciples in our Gospel lesson have kind of melded into a large crowd of at least temporarily enthusiastic disciples.

In the previous chapter, Jesus had set the twelve down and had told them quite specifically about the humiliation and death that was coming to him. But the disciples didn't understand, they couldn't put it all together. "God, dying? Huh?"

It's hard for us to grasp, too. There is so much mystery involved...

When they get near the Mount of Olives, Jesus asks two of the disciples who are following him to do "donkey duty." They are to go into a nearby village and when they come upon a colt tied up which has never been ridden before, they are to untie it and bring it to Jesus. If anyone asks "Why are you untying it?", they are to say, "The Lord needs it."

Things happened just like Jesus said it might. While untying the colt, the owners came and asked why they were untying the colt, and their answer- "The Lord needs it" - must have satisfied the owners. Note that tying and untying is mentioned five times. It may be an allusion to Genesis 49:11 that speaks of a ruler or king coming who would tie up his donkey to a vine.

Until the ultimate ruler comes	
and the nations obey him.	
He'll tie up his donkey to the grapevine,	
his purebred prize to a sturdy branch.	

Jews who were familiar with scripture and who were on the lookout for the promised Messiah, would have also known the Zechariah 9:9 passage that prophesied:

## **The Coming Ruler of God's People**

### **Zechariah 9:9**

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.

In Israel's history their kings rode to their coronations on young donkeys, and one historian notes that there was rabbinic instruction that no one should use the animal on which a king rides.

We notice there are no palm branches mentioned. He does, however, say that people kept spreading their cloaks on the ground ahead of the path of Jesus and the donkey.

This might stir memories of more ancient Israelites who spread their cloaks on the steps before Jehu as they were declaring him king in 2 Kings 9:13.

And there was joy. There's a lot of joy in Luke's gospel, from the opening in chapter one, and in many places throughout.

Here, as they follow Jesus down the path from the Mount of Olives, the crowd of disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice - for all the deeds of power they had seen. Luke notes some of their praise. It was a quote from Psalm 118:26 that says, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" But they substituted the word "king" instead of "one." "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." And they added, "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven."

Notice that they didn't say peace on earth, like the angels did in 2:14 to the shepherds. That still is a future promise that is not yet completely manifested. But peace in heaven is a surety - as God has been able to share God's plan for saving humanity in Jesus.

We all are invited to say yes to God's salvation. If we desire forgiveness of sins and to be loved and known like no one but God can ever do, if we want Holy Spirit power for living and loving and sharing God's peace, then we say, "Yes" to God's invitation.

So in this part of the journey, as we are following Jesus on that colt down the Mount of Olives, we're reminded that - like the disciples - there will be things we don't understand. God will make them clear in God's timing. We also are reminded that when we align ourselves with Jesus, we are aligning ourselves with God and with God's purposes, with God's ancient covenant, for Jesus is God's anointed one, the King and Lord over all.

After the joy-filled procession into Jerusalem, Jesus faced unbelievable suffering. The religious leaders were plotting to kill him. They set traps for him by asking him tricky questions - hoping he would say something incriminating that would then allow them to get rid of him.

They worked in concert with the government, using the power of Rome to arrest him, torture and shame him.

Even the people who had been closest to him, the disciples, ended up denying and betraying him.

Yet he kept heading straight into the danger.

Henri Nouwen shared a story in one of his books that makes me think of what Jesus had to endure in that last week of his life.

Once there was a very old man who used to meditate early every morning under a large tree on the bank of the Ganges River in India. One morning, having finished his meditation, the old man opened his eyes and saw a scorpion floating helplessly in the strong current of the river. As the scorpion was pulled close to the tree, it got caught in the long tree roots that branched out into the river. The scorpion struggled frantically to free itself but got more and more entangled in the complex network of tree roots.

When the old man saw this, he immediately stretched himself onto the extended roots and reached out to rescue the drowning scorpion. But as soon as he touched it, the animal jerked and stung him wildly. Instinctively the man withdrew his hand, but then, having regained his balance, he once again stretched himself out along the roots to save the agonized scorpion. But every time the old man came within reach, the scorpion stung him so badly with its poisonous tail that his hands became swollen and bloody and his face distorted by pain.

At that moment, a passer-by saw the old man stretched out on the roots struggling with the scorpion and shouted: 'Hey, stupid old man. What's wrong with you? Only a fool risks his life for the sake of an ugly, useless creature. Don't you know that you may kill yourself to save that ungrateful animal?'

Slowly the old man turned his head, and looking calmly in the stranger's eyes, he said: 'Friend, because it is the nature of the scorpion to sting, why should I give up my own nature to save?'

In this story I see Jesus getting "stung" by everybody around him. But he would not give up. His nature was love, and love trusts God; and love saves.

Our psalm today is a prayer that teaches us about trusting in God, while we're living and when we're dying.

The gospel writers reported that Jesus quoted a part of this psalm when from the cross he said (verse 5) "Into your hands, I commit my spirit."

Note some of the words in the first five verses we're looking at. They draw a picture of what the speaker is going through: trouble, sorrow, grief, affliction, scorn...

But in spite of the "terror on every side," the psalmist trusts in God. Why? He recognizes that God is a God of unfailing love. It is the nature of love to work to save the loved one. The psalmist also recognizes that his times are in God's hands. When we trust God, whose love never fails, we trust God with the timing of things in our lives, our life span, our death.

Jesus demonstrated this absolute trust as he headed toward the cross. He kept on loving, kept on saving. That's what a God of love does. That love is freely offered to us.

So in this part of the journey, as we are following Jesus through hard, trying times, even toward death, we ask for the Holy Spirit's help to recognize and trust the saving love of God.

Our Isaiah text contains the third of four Servant Songs. The person speaking could be the prophet Isaiah himself, or a remnant of faithful Israel. But there are pictures in this text that also remind us of Jesus and his persecution in Jerusalem.

The servant is a disciple, who from intimate association with his master has learned what the master knows. Because of the servant's discipleship, he knows how to lift the spirits of the weary. It seems he knows what to say and do because he has listened and has been obedient.

It is interesting that the servant claims to have not been rebellious. That would rule out a lot of prophets, who struggled with and rebelled at various aspects of their call. It wouldn't rule out Jesus.

Apparently there were people around the servant who felt he deserved to be hurt, to be persecuted. That was not unusual for a true prophet's work, as they usually stood outside the circles of power, and when they called for change, it was most often not well-received.

What is so amazing about this servant's attitude, is his complete trust in the Lord God. He trusts that God will help him. He trusts that God is near. He knows that in the end he will be vindicated, and not be put to shame.

So in this part of the journey, as we watch how Jesus sets his face like flint and continues moving toward the cross, trusting in God's nearness, trusting in God's vindication, may we pray for greater trust in God for what's ahead.

Paul wanted their church to guard unity. He wanted them to be like-minded - having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. Paul wanted them to think, to consider how they were going to choose to live. Selfishly or selflessly?

To help them make the right choice, Paul suggested they remember and imitate the mindset of Christ. And here we are given one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible about who Jesus is and what he accomplished. Some think this is one of the earliest Christian hymns; some think it was an early poetic statement of faith.

It describes Jesus as the Preexistent One, who emptied himself to take the form of a servant, to put on the form of humanity. It is saying that prior to taking on the form of a servant, he already was God.

Some might think that "Oh, so Jesus was God, and then stopped being God when he became human, and then later went back to being God? No. As N. T. Wright so beautifully says it, "Paul is saying that Jesus already existed even before he became a human being (verse 7). But the decision to become human, and to go all the way along the road of obedience, obedience to the divine plan of salvation, yes, all the way to the cross –this decision was not a decision to stop being divine. It was a decision about **what it really meant to be divine.**"

"Jesus retained his equality with God; the point of the cross, for Paul, is that '**God was in Christ** reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5.19). Nor did Jesus regard this equality as something to take advantage of, something to exploit. Rather, the eternal son of God, the one who became human in and as Jesus of Nazareth, regarded his

equality with God as **committing him to the course he took (no turning back, no turning back):** of becoming **human**, of becoming Israel's **anointed representative**, of **dying** under the weight of the world's evil. That is what it meant to be equal with God."

And as we look at the God-who-took-on-human-flesh dying on the cross, how can we not help but be amazed at the picture it gives us of God? He doesn't grasp for more and more power, for all he can get, like the kings and rulers and leaders we're used to. No, he gives and gives and gives. "We have a God of self-giving love. Jesus has done what only God could do." (N.T. Wright, Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters, p. )

This is outlandish, lavish love - this giving love. And what a scandal, to have this love crucified on a cross, "a death reserved for slaves and insurrectionists." As Gordon Fee reminds us, the people in Paul's day did not wear crosses as fine jewelry, or post crosses on the outsides of their meeting places. (Gordon Fee, Paul's Letter to the Philippians)

But Jesus' death is not the end of the story. Although Paul doesn't mention the resurrection and the ascension, they are presupposed by what he does say. Once again, we don't see Jesus grasping for power and fame. God, however, exalts Jesus to the highest degree. And God bestows on the name Jesus, a significance that excels all other names.

Here Paul is covering the not-yet part of the Jesus story. There will come a day, the Bible promises, when all created creatures will acknowledge God's sovereignty, will own that Jesus is Lord. "Every tongue will confess - those in the heavens - referring to all heavenly beings, angels and demons; those of earth referring to all those who are living on earth when Jesus comes again; and those "under the earth" probably referring to "the dead," who also shall be raised to acknowledge his lordship over all." (Gordon Fee, Paul's Letter to the Philippians)

That kind of hope should encourage them to want to live the kind of love Jesus lived. If they truly are followers of Jesus, with the Holy Spirit working transformation in them, they should be growing in having more and more of the mindset of Jesus in their attitudes and relationships.

And how do we receive this message of Paul today? With the time that we've been given to live, do we want to please God by the way we live? Do we have a desire to live for God's glory and not our own? Do we want to go through life always grasping for things, or do we want to grow in giving? The event we'll remember this week is the greatest giving story ever told.

As we continue this journey with Jesus to the cross this week, Paul says, "Think of Jesus, remember Jesus..."