

TAKING THE RISK OF HOLY WEEK

Luke 19.27b-40

April 14, 2019, Palm Sunday

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Gathering: Luke 19.27b-40 (the *Inclusive Bible*)

... Jesus went ahead with the ascent to Jerusalem. Approaching Bethphage and Bethany, near what is called the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of the disciples with these instructions: “Go into the village ahead of you. Upon entering it, you’ll find a tethered colt that no one has yet ridden. Untie it and lead it back. If anyone should ask you, ‘Why are you untying it? Say, ‘The Rabbi needs it.’” The disciples departed on their errand and found things just as Jesus had said. As they untied the colt, its owners said to them, “Why are you doing that?” They explained that the Rabbi needed it. Then the disciples led the animal to Jesus and, laying their cloaks on it, helped him mount. People spread their cloaks on the roadway as Jesus rode along. As they reached the descent from the Mount of Olives, the entire crowd of disciples joined them and began to rejoice and praise God loudly for the display of power they had seen, saying:

“Blessed is the One who comes in the name of our God!

Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest!”

Some of the religious leaders in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” But Jesus replied, “I tell you, if they were to keep silent, the very stones would cry out!”

Blessing the Palms by Jan Richardson (*Circle of Grace*)

This blessing
can be heard coming
from a long way off.

This blessing
is making
its steady way
up the road
toward you.

This blessing
blooms in the throats
of women,
springs from the hearts

of men,
tumbles out of the mouths
of children.

This blessing
is stitched into
the seams
of the cloaks
that line the road,
etched into the branches
that trace the path,
echoes in
the breathing
of the willing colt,
the click
of the donkey's hoof
against the stones.

Something is rising
beneath this blessing.
Something will try
to drown it out.

But this blessing
cannot be turned back,
cannot be made
to still its voice,
cannot cease
to sing its praise
of the One who comes
along the way
it makes.

SERMON

Before I begin this morning, I am reminded that the person we are celebrating began his preaching career in his hometown with a text from

Isaiah 61: The Spirit is upon me to preach good news to the poor; recovery of sight to the blind; freedom to prisoners and to proclaim that this year is the year of God's grace and justice."

The assembled crowd who had known him since he was a little boy, thought that was just great. "They all spoke well of him," Luke 4 says; that is, until Jesus started to explain what he meant; that he was including in that good news those who had historically been their sworn enemies.

Then this appreciative hometown crowd turned into an angry mob that tried to throw him off a cliff.

Sometimes people ask me if I still get nervous when I get up to preach. The answer is "yes." I live with this story from Luke 4 constantly running in my head. Is the measure of a good sermon how many people want to throw me off a cliff when it's done? Is the only good sermon a dangerous one?

So, yes, I get nervous. No matter how many times I stand in this pulpit, I realize that I am taking a risk. There's the risk that I won't say anything that touches you or moves you or opens your heart. And there's the risk that I will say something. And maybe it sounds threatening to you. And this lovely crowd will turn into an angry mob. Although this is Seattle. We are too polite for that. Instead, you are more likely to just go away.

If I am going to take the risk this morning, I have to trust, as Jesus did, that the Spirit is upon me to preach some kind of good news, no matter how threatening it might sound. And it would be helpful to know that I am not in this alone. It would help if you would sing with me:

Spirit of the Living God, fall a-fresh on me.

Spirit of the Living God, fall a-fresh on me.

Melt me, mold me, fill me use me.

Spirit of the Living God, fall a-fresh on me.

May it be so.

From the time Jesus began his ministry in his hometown to this day that opens on to the end of his life, Jesus knew how quickly a crowd can turn into a mob.

As we move into this week, I have been reading Amy-Jill Levine. She is a practicing Orthodox Jew who is also a renowned New Testament scholar. She teaches at Vanderbilt Divinity School where Pastor Anita was one of her students.

I have been reading Amy-Jill Levine exactly because I realize that one of the risks we face in moving through this week, is that the history of how these Holy Week stories have been told has not only been denigrating of Jewish people but has been used as an excuse for violence against them.

It's still hard for me to believe, but I found a paper I wrote in graduate school in 1981 – that's 38 years ago when we typed papers on actual typewriters and had to use that nasty white-out stuff to fix mistakes. The paper was for a class on the reformation and was titled, "John Calvin and Anti-Semitism: Factors in the Development of Positive Attitudes."

I went looking for the paper because I remembered something about the Middle Ages and how Christians depicted the events of Holy Week in their popular "passion plays." One historian wrote: "... it is in religious drama, the incomparable vehicle for propaganda in that period, that anti-Jewish sentiment is cultivated most assiduously," which led me to write: *The elements of the plays themselves were not necessarily anti-Semitic but the presentation of those elements became anti-Semitic when the Medieval dramatists used the medium to magnify Jewish participation in the events ... to lend credence to the contemporary superstitions [about Jews]. The tonal pitch of the presentations was such that the massacre of Jewish residents often followed their production in towns and villages across Europe.*

So, if you are wondering why Pastor Anita is being so clear about not naming “the Jews” as the bad guys in the stories we tell this week, this is why. And she is right to explain that, when we read these stories, we use words like “the people” and “the religious leaders” so we don’t pass on the anti-semitism of past generations to the next one.

I always find it surprising that I actually have to say that Jesus was not a Christian. He was a Jew with Jewish followers that greeted him with, “Hosanna!” a Hebrew word from Psalm 118, on that morning when he rode into Jerusalem in a direct provocation of the army of Rome and the religious leaders who were complicit in their tyranny.

And when I hear Christians talk about the Jews of Jesus’ day being literalists and legalists against whom Jesus taught freedom, love and peace, I have to remind people that everything I know about literalism and legalism, I learned in a Christian church. And it was deadly.

So before we even dare to enter the stories of this week, I think we need to recognize the risks we are facing. How we talk about Jesus in these stories can fan the flames of anti-semitism and can feed a Christian triumphalism that makes us blind to our own complicity in turning a happy crowd on Palm Sunday into a hateful mob on Good Friday. Whether we intend it or not, how we tell the stories can get people killed.

There is a risk in how we enter this Holy Week.

After all, the story is about a crowd. And crowds can be risky. Amy-Jill Levine says, that crowd “is us.”

The crowd ... knows what it wants. It wants what we all want. It wants political reform, it wants a meek king, it wants compassion rather than conquest. It wants a balanced budget, affordable health care, a strong military, clean water, peaceful streets, lower taxes, good schools ... But leaders cannot do everything on their own. We’ve already seen how the

Psalms insist the kings must rely on God. They must also rely on the people to carry out God's will. As we praise a king, a Son of David, we should also ask how much we are willing to contribute in order to achieve those goals; how much are we willing to take responsibility ...

What are we willing to risk? "Holy Week is a time to think about risk," Professor Levine says, "because that's what this whole Passion narrative represents."

Can we risk being part of a crowd that gathers to protest the way people are being treated? "Crowds are fickle," Levine says. And when expectations run high and hopes are dashed, a fickle crowd can become an unstable one. A crowd can turn into a mob.

The religious leaders of the day were well-aware of the risks and that's why they want Jesus to make the people be quiet. They know that this crowd is timed perfectly for Rome to see and they, as religious leaders, will be blamed for not keeping the people in line.

When Jesus says, "I tell you, if they were to keep silent, the very stones would cry out!" it must have struck fear into their hearts – for good reason.

Perhaps Jesus is anticipating the words of the African-American activist and writer, Audre Lorde, "Your silence will not protect you."

The stories of Holy Week ask: Are we willing to take the risk of being part of that crowd that gathers to break the silence of fear and abuse? Are we willing to risk our own voices?

The story in Luke begins with this odd command to go into a neighboring town and take an unbroken colt.

Professor Levine imagines that
... a popular leader sends two members of his entourage from, say, a respectable suburb into the downtown area of a big city, with the

instructions, “you will find a Lexus sedan, and next to it a sports car – bring them to me. And if anyone asks, ‘Hey, what are you doing with those cars?,’ just say, ‘The Lord needs them ... [it’ll] be fine.

But let’s imagine that the popular leader sends two of his followers into a neighborhood and says, “you will find a little red wagon and a bike, take them and bring them to me.”

And so, as the crowd is gathered, here comes that leader sitting in a little red wagon, being pulled by a bike – while, at the same time across town, tanks are rolling down the street with soldiers marching in perfect formation. The contrast would be hard to miss.

Perhaps that is more to the point.

And the risk isn’t just that someone has entrusted their colt or their donkey or their Lexus or their little red wagon to these disciples. The risk is that, by entrusting their resources to this protest, they have now become accomplices in this direct act of provocation.

The stories of Holy Week ask if we are willing to risk our resources? Are we willing to use what we have as accomplices in this great “Hosanna” movement of protest and praise and prayer?

In fact, just being in that crowd was taking a risk.

I can’t read this story this year without holding this vision of Heather Heyer in my mind. August 12, 2017. Heather was a 32-year old paralegal who had never been part of a protest before. But she saw that white-supremacy mob marching in Charlottesville and she had to do something – she had to be part of that crowd that raised its voice to say, “no!” And as she was gathered in that crowd, a young man who celebrated images of hatred and violence drove his 2010 Dodge Challenger into the crowd, injuring 28 people and killing Heather Heyer.

It's true: Don't ever underestimate the power of showing up. But I should tell you that doing so can be a risk – that's part of what makes it so powerful.

What am I willing to risk? My voice? My resources? My body?

And there is another risk of this Holy Week. I had never made this connection before. I was preaching a few weeks ago about Luke 13 where Jesus laments: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I would have gathered you like a mother hen gathers her chicks, but you refused; you will not see me again until you say: ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God.’”

Well, here we are.

The connection I missed came two weeks ago when Dr. Hunter was preaching on the “prodigal son” story. It's just two chapters later, Luke 15. Jesus tells 3 stories; a shepherd who had 100 sheep but lost one and, when he found it, he “gathered his friends and neighbors saying, “rejoice with me;” and then a woman has lost a coin and when she finds it she “calls together her friends and neighbors, saying “rejoice with me;” and the father who has two sons and when the younger one who has been lost and finally “comes to himself” and returns home, the father welcomes him with open arms and puts on a lavish celebration. But the older brother *refuses* to go in. Foreshadowing his ride into Jerusalem, Jesus says “I would have gathered you but you refused.”

Somehow whatever risk there was for the older brother to celebrate with his family – whatever he thought he would lose, whatever he wasn't willing to let go of, whatever was so broken in him that he could not allow himself the joy of welcoming his brother home – whatever it was, the risk wasn't worth it. His father pleads with him, “you are always with me and all that is mine is yours; but we *had* to celebrate and rejoice.”

The older brother would be happy to shut it down. The religious leaders plead with Jesus to shut it down. But the crowd, no matter how risky it was, could not help itself. They could not hide their joy.

I wonder if one of the most compelling things we can do together is to celebrate the things that really matter. How much more powerful would it be if, along with our protests and our prayers and our praise, we generated some joy in the possibilities of our life together?

Crowds are gathered to create something. Mobs are gathered to destroy something.

And there is a crowd calling you this morning - a crowd that is gathering to give voice to the voiceless; a crowd that is willing to use its resources as accomplices in the movement of hope; a crowd that is as willing to put its body on the line as it is to go dancing in the streets.

Will you refuse? Or will you take the risk? Because today, if you hear that voice – if you hear that crowd calling you – for your sake, for the world’s sake, for God’s sake, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

My paper relies on the work of Leon Pliakov in *The History of Anti-Semitism: For the Time of Christ to the Court Jews*, translated by Richard Howard (The Vanguard Press, 1965), p.126. Amy-Jill Levine, *Entering The Passion of Jesus* (Abingdon Press, 2018), see pp.10, 34-36.