

We have officially entered the season called Lent in the Christian calendar. We are in the 40 days leading up to Easter Sunday, not including Sundays. Traditionally this was a time for training new followers of Christ. Since the 2nd century, new converts would be educated in Christianity and then baptized into their new lives on Easter Sunday, which was the one time a year baptism occurred. In the 4th century the spiritual training stretched to 40 days.

One of the aspects of learning to follow Christ was abstinence and fasting - based on Jesus' experience of being led by the Holy Spirit into the desert, also known as the wilderness - where he fasted for 40 days and 40 nights and then was tempted or tested by the devil, diabolos in Greek, which means accuser or liar. This is where the idea of 'giving something up' for Lent originates - a mild experience of abstinence following Jesus' life and example.

Sundays aren't not included in the Lent fast, because Sundays are "little Easters". Rather than Easter being the most important Sunday of the year, every Sunday is a little Easter when we celebrate the resurrected Jesus. Every Sunday is a feast or celebration day, so it's not included in the Lent observance of abstinence. Of course, all of this is just tradition passed down over the centuries, not a Biblical mandate. For those of you who have given something up for Lent, did you know that Sundays are feast days so you don't have to keep the fast on Sundays?

You know that the Roman Catholic church was the first organized Christian church, beginning in - Rome - where it's believed the disciples Peter and Paul died and is the location of one of the earliest communities following Christ - remember that Paul wrote a letter to the

church in Rome, known as the book of Romans in the New Testament. Well the Anglican Church (known as the Episcopal Church in America) is an offshoot of the Roman Catholic Church and the United Methodist Church is an offshoot of the Anglican or Episcopal church. That's one of the reasons why our worship includes a call to worship and hymns in between prayers and scripture readings when we stand up and sit down, it's because of our history with the Roman Catholic and Anglican/Episcopal churches and their experience of mass and liturgical worship. So many times I've met married couples in the churches I've served who ended up worshipping in the Methodist church because one of them is Roman Catholic in their upbringing and the other is Baptist or unchurched and this form of worship seems to help blend their two traditions.

I say all this is to partly explain why the Methodist church observes Lent, and Holy Week leading up to Easter. It's part of our history, our tradition.

Today, in 2022, these 40 days still help us get close to Christ - whether we're new believers, lapsed believers, long-time believers or seekers - those of us still not sure what we believe about Jesus.

The way we're going to get closer to Christ these next 40 days is to read, study and ask questions about the final week of Jesus' life as he entered Jerusalem and moved toward the cross. There is a study I'm using called "Entering the Passion of Jesus".

The Wednesday night class beginning March 16 will be based on this study also. It's by Amy-Jill Levine, who is a Jewish woman and professor of New Testament and Jewish studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School. I led this

study last year and got a lot out of it and I think you will also.

Jesus' final days began as he entered Jerusalem - an experience of tragedy and triumph. So although Palm Sunday isn't until April 10, today we'll look at that first day he rode into Jerusalem and every Sunday up to Easter we'll look closely at each day of his final week.

Of course, we already know the end of the story. Jesus had even told his followers exactly what would happen three times before going to Jerusalem. He told them 'that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected.... And killed, and after three days rise again.' Jesus often spoke in parables or metaphor, but not in this case. Mark 8:32 insists, "He said all of these things openly.."

I want to point out three things that are important in this event - which is called Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The first is that it's found in all four gospels. But if we didn't have the account from John, instead of "Palm Sunday" we might be calling it "Leafy Branches Cut from the Field Sunday", because the word palm is missing in the other three gospels.

Amy-Jill Levine - who also goes by AJ so that's how I'll refer to her - AJ Levine remarks - "Should we care so much about such trivial details as that? Yes, I think so! Because those missing palms tell us something about ourselves. Whenever we read the Bible, we often see whatever we expect to see and we read into it what's not actually there. But the whole message of the Bible, and specifically about the kingdom of heaven is an invitation to see things differently and deeply - beyond our expectations and preferences."

There's a Biblical scholar named N.T. Wright who also points out, "People often get upset when you teach them what is in the Bible instead of what they PRESUME is in the Bible." It's like when we find out those famous sayings we love aren't really in the Bible. Like "God helps those who help themselves" or "Cleanliness is next to Godliness." Nope. Can't find 'em there.

The second thing to point out to you today, is the richness of this story and how it fulfills a particular prophecy about Jesus. The prophet Zechariah chapter nine verse nine states, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you triumphant and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey...he shall command peace to the nations." Sounds familiar, right? Like we just heard it in our Matthew passage for today?

One of the graduate school professors at my daughter's University - Point Loma Nazarene - Dr. Michael Lodahl was also Theologian-in-Residence at the last Methodist church I served in Coronado. He wrote a commentary on this section of scripture which said, "A 'king' making his procession on such a slow and lowly beast as a donkey can hardly be understood to be inspiring violent resistance, which is what Jesus was accused of. This new king enters humbly on a colt and will very soon shed no blood except his own."

The third idea to share this morning is that it's important to understand that this moment when Jesus enters Jerusalem was a very busy holiday - it was Passover. Jerusalem would have been filled to the gills - even overflowing with pilgrims and tourists from all over the Roman empire. Crowd control would have been critical. Think of Mardi Gras in New

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Orleans, or New Year's Eve in Times Square or the Rose Float Parade in Pasadena. Law enforcement would have been out in droves.

But law enforcement would have been cavalry and foot soldiers under the governor Pontius Pilate - not people who lived in Jerusalem already. They also had to travel there from Caesarea on the coast - from the West, where the governor lived. Pilate would have ridden in on a stallion with a big show of military pomp as a sign of invincibility and the Roman government's power.

Now contrast that with this story in Matthew where Jesus and his friends come in from Bethany, on the East. Jesus rides a donkey, a beast of burden, not a war horse. Some theologians point out it might have been a form of "street theater" poking fun at Pilate and the Roman soldiers on the other side of town. But it also was probably a sign of peace.

In those days, when battle was brewing, the leader of a group of people would ride into battle on a stallion, of course. Showing his power. But when the battle was over and the war was won, he'd ride into the conquered city on a donkey instead. A sign that defeat had come upon the people and stallions wouldn't be needed - a donkey would suffice and be a sign of peace that the war was over.

This is how Jesus enters Jerusalem. On a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. Though the Roman officials and the leaders of the Jewish people were just getting ready for their fight with Jesus and his band of believers, Jesus signals that the war has already been won before it's even begun.