

WELCOME

Thank you for coming!

We're so glad you've chosen to worship with us on this First Sunday in Lent

This is a sacred time, as we gather in community to open our hearts to God.

I invite you to light a candle,
wherever you are

As our candles are lit here in our sanctuary,
to remind us of God's presence with us,
and to set aside this as a time of worship for you.

Our service will be in voice and text.

Music will be on the media viewer, so be sure that you have media turned on. .

There will be a link in Nearby Chat if you want to view the video in your own browser.

I'm going to start our Gathering Music and run the rest of the announcements underneath.

GATHERING MUSIC

"When Love Comes Town" - U2/BB King

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_TGU35i8czo

First United Church of Christ and Conference Center Second Life is a church with full real life standing in the Eastern Association; Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ (UCC).

And anyone you see with a "Minister" tag is an ordained UCC minister in real life.

As we like to say, it's good to be real in Second Life!

And as a UCC church, we'd like you to know that

"No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey,
you are welcome here."

We celebrate God's Love everyday.

and seek to be a place of belonging for those who need it, where all people will be included, accepted and supported in their journey of faith and their struggles in life.

If you would like a bulletin for today's service you can find it in the red binder in the back.

If you would like to make a donation to support this ministry

there is a donation bowl in the back,

or you can go to our website

firstuccsl.org

We thank you for the blessing of your presence and your support.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

No, it's not Palm Sunday on the liturgical calendar.

It's the First Sunday in Lent.

But I am preaching this Lent from

"Entering the Passion of Jesus"

By Jewish New Testament Scholar Amy-Jill Levine,

Who delves into the history and literature of the last days of Jesus' life

As described in the stories of Holy Week.

We usually move so fast from Palm Sunday to Easter,

I liked the idea of slowing that down,

And looking more deeply at these sacred Holy Week stories.

Each one a step towards the cross.

Prof. Levine's goal, she says, is to challenge

"us to examine our consciences and find out

How deepening our relationship with Jesus and the Bible

Brings us into closer relationship with others and the world.

The Gospels give us four versions of the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

Although she discussed each one, Prof. Levine focusses on Matthew's version of the story.

So let us listen to God speaking through the words of Matthew, chapter 21, verses 1 through 11.

MATTHEW 21:1-11 (NRSVUE)

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage,

at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them,

"Go into the village ahead of you,

and immediately you will find a donkey tied and a colt with her;

untie them and bring them to me.

If anyone says anything to you, just say this,

'The Lord needs them.'

And he will send them immediately."

This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet:

"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."

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them;

they brought the donkey and the colt and put their cloaks on them,

and he sat on them.

A very large crowd[b] spread their cloaks on the road,

and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

When he entered Jerusalem,

the whole city was in turmoil, asking,

"Who is this?"

The crowds were saying,

"This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

The Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

"Context is Everything"

Let us pray . . .

It must have been something to see.

The roads leading to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover

The Feast of Freedom,

The end of slavery.

A time to remember when God acted to save the people of Israel
From the oppression of Egypt.

"Thousands upon thousands would come to Jerusalem—
From Athens and Egypt,
Babylon and Rome,
Damascus, and, of course,
Galilee."

Jerusalem was as holy a city then as it is now,
And just as contested.

And the people of Israel were again living under the thumb of oppression,
From Rome this time, instead of Egypt.

Indeed, the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate,
Was at that very time riding into Jerusalem with his soldiers
On a different road,
To remind the people who was in control.

This is the setting, the context in which this story unfolds.
And context is everything.

Place yourself in the crowd that day, close to Jesus.

On the road a few miles from the city.

This close, the roads would be crowded with pilgrims
As streams of people converge on the city gates.

The stage is set.

Jesus couldn't hope for a better audience.

It is time.

And then Jesus tells two of his followers:

"Go into the village ahead of you,
and immediately you will find a donkey tied and a colt with her;
untie them and bring them to me.

If anyone says anything to you, just say this,
'The Lord needs them.'

And he will send them immediately."

Say what? So the two go off, and sure enough, there they are,

A donkey and her colt,

The magic words are said, and voila!

Just as Jesus said.

Magic! Or is it?

Prof. Levine puts the story in a contemporary context.

"Imagine . . . 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.'

That'll be fine."

Not likely!

The next call will not be for spiritual redemption;
it will be to 911 to report two stolen cars."

Have you ever been to a magic show?

We're shown an empty box from all sides.
The box is closed up tight.
Maybe even chained and padlocked for good measure.
The assistants spin it around and around,
The magic words are said,
The box is opened and voila! The inside is full of birds.
Magic? Well, yes.
But not the supernatural kind.
The kind that takes hours of preparation and practice.
Prof. Levine suggests that's the kind of magic that was at work
On the road to Jerusalem that long ago day.
We know from the Gospel of John that Jesus had been to Jerusalem several times
In the last few years,
Had sought and found followers there.
So Jesus probably had friends in the area,
Some of his best friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus,
Lived in Bethany, only 2 miles from Jerusalem along that route.
More than likely, Jesus had made prior arrangements.
This whole event was carefully planned.
From the timing,
when the streets would be filled with pilgrims,
the symbolic significance of the holiday,
the choice and procurement of his mounts,
The route he would take,
to the words his followers would be primed to chant as he rode into the city.
It was all very deliberate.
But then, as Prof. Levine notes,
"If one is going to confront any system that prevents human wholeness—
Be it poverty, sickness, colonialism, or lack of compassion—
It helps to have a plan."
Jesus was making a very public statement,
About who he was, what he stood for,
With symbolism no Jew of the time could miss,
Which each element of this teaching moment
Designed to correlate in the minds of his audience
With well-known passages of Hebrew scripture,
Hebrew scripture that was as deeply embedded in popular culture of the day
As Star Wars or Harry Potter is today.
If today Jesus had been dressed in flowing robes and a wizard's at,
And rode in on a broom carrying a wand,
Most people would get the reference.
Dumbledore – the powerful headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,
Come to save the day.
What's important is not that Jesus was showing psychic powers,
But that we, like the crowd around him that day, get the message.
They would understand the context.
The fact that this event was recorded in all four gospels
shows Jesus plan was successful.
They got the point.
We might need a little more help.

So let's look at the two primary Hebrew scriptures Jesus used to script this event,
So we can understand that context too.
The author of the Gospel of Matthew doesn't want us to miss it,
So he conveniently quotes from one of those sources,
Chapter 9 of the Book of Zechariah.
Prof. Levine notes that when a Gospel text cites scripture,
And Matthew does it a lot,
It is helpful to look at that quotation in context,
Context the original readers of the Gospel would have known.
So here is Zechariah chapter 9, verses 9 through 12.

ZECHARIAH 9:9-12 (NRSVUE)

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
He[will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war horse from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth.
As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you,
I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.
Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;
today I declare that I will restore to you double.

Matthew's is the only Gospel to use two animals,
Both a donkey and her colt,
But this is an important detail.
Because of the way Zechariah was written.
Zechariah used a common for the time literary technique,
"poetic parallelism,"
Where a repetition of a second line enhances and emphasizes the first
By adding detail.
For example, in the Song of Deborah in the Book of Judges,
One of the Hebrew Bible's oldest poems,
There is this line:
"He asked water and she gave him milk,
She brought him curds in a lordly bowl."
This didn't mean she brought him "both a glass of milk and some cottage cheese."
The poet was emphasizing that the woman did not give him the water he asked for to
drink,
She brought him milk, but not just milk to drink, but milk that could not be drunk,
She brought him milk curdled into cheese.
Zechariah did not intend to say there were two animals,
But either Jesus or Matthew recording the event,
Chose to interpret the Zechariah passage literally.

Since the other three Gospels only have one animal,
It's hard to say for sure,
But Prof. Levine thinks it was probably Matthew,
Who did so for the same reason Zechariah wrote his poem that way,
To put an exclamation point to the symbolism.
She imagines Matthew, "writing this line and thinking,
'Does Jesus fulfill prophecy?'
And then answering, 'You bet he does!'"
See, I'll even put in both animals to be sure people don't miss the reference.
And what a prophesy it is!
Zechariah describes a king, alright,
But a king of justice, not of military conquest.
The direct opposite of the power of the Roman empire,
Riding through a different gate at the same time.
The point is made by the substitution of a donkey for a war horse as Jesus' mount,
But also by other references to the Zechariah text.
The difficulty translating the Hebrew and Greek into English
Makes it harder for us to get the point.
First, in English the king of Zechariah's prophesy is described as "humble."
The underlying word brings with it the idea of
"someone in authority who does not lord it over others."
It's the same underlying word used earlier in Matthew in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount
And usually translated as "meek":
"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."
Prof. Levine notes:
"Inheriting the earth . . . for the Gospel, requires being humble,
not in the sense of lowly, but in the sense of being able to listen to others,
to share resources, to prioritize community rather than authority,
to serve rather than to be served.
All that underlies the words from Zechariah,
and Matthew's first-century Jewish audience would have known it."

Two other words Zechariah uses to describe this king are important here,
"triumphant and victorious."
The word in Hebrew translated as "triumphant" literally means "righteous."
"The focus for Zechariah, and for Jesus,
Is not on militaristic conquering,
But on the power of justice."
And the Hebrew word translated as "victorious" literally means "saved."
It is the same root word in Hebrew as the term "hosanna,"
And the Hebrew names Joshua and, yes, Jesus.
The same Hebrew word is used in Psalm 33, which also mentions a king:
"A king is not saved by his great army;
A warrior is not delivered by his great strength."
Prof. Levine sums this up:
"Zechariah speaks of a king who does not lord it over others,
but who takes his place with those who are suffering.
Zechariah speaks of a king who is righteous rather than violent.
Zechariah speaks about a king who is strong in faith, not armed to the teeth."
He is a king who cuts off the weapons of war and "commands peace."

This is the leader, this is the Jesus, we are called as Christians to follow.
This is the kind of leader who will save us.
Something to think about as we witness the global events of our day.
Something to consider as we go into an election season.

The word "hosanna," "save us," chanted by the crowd,
Along with the phrase:
"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,"
Have more to teach us.
They are citations to Psalm 118.
That psalm is one of the "Hallel" or "praise" psalms chanted at certain holy
festivals,
Including Passover.
"Hallel" is where we get "hallelujah."
Let's listen to the verses of Psalm 118 around that citation:

PSALM 118:19-29 (NRSVUE)
Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the Lord.
This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.
I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.
This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!
O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
We bless you from the house of the Lord.
The Lord is God,
and he has given us light.
Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.
You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God; I will extol you.
O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

Jesus would have ridden through a crowd already singing this psalm
As they entered Jerusalem for Passover.
He could have used this context to make his point for him.
You ask for salvation—here I am.
"We are all in need of some form of salvation," notes Prof. Levine.
"From sin, yes.
But also from pain, from despair, from loneliness,

From poverty, from oppression.”
Save us from ourselves, perhaps.
And the idea of salvation in most Hebrew scriptures
“is not about spiritual matters, but physical ones.”
“Follow me through this gate,” Jesus is saying without even having to utter a word,
“and find what you need.”
What do you need saving from? What do we need?

Lastly, this is not some salvation in some nebulous future;
It is here, it is now.
This – “this is the day that the Lord has made,” sings Psalm 118,
This is the day for rejoicing,
As the people rejoiced, singing and waving their branches,
On the road to Jerusalem that long ago day.
Lent is mostly a quiet, more contemplative season,
But this rejoicing is part of this season too.

The kin-dom – and kingdom – of heaven is already here,
If we just pay attention.
And yet this day of rejoicing cannot be read separated from the call for justice,
And from where we know this road leads – the cross.
“Earlier in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus not only predicts his suffering, death, and
vindication,
He tells his followers:
‘If any want to become my followers,
Let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’”
At the time of Jesus, to take up the cross meant to take risks,
To risk hardships, loss, humiliation, imprisonment,
Even Roman capital punishment,
“to proclaim a vision of a better world . . .
And then to work for it.”
We think of Jesus taking up his cross to carry it to Golgatha and his crucifixion.
But Jesus took up his cross when he rode a donkey through the gates of Jerusalem,
That is the context of his triumphal entry that day.
We have to hold them together,
The rejoicing and the risk.
The one is the context for the other,
And context is everything.
Amen.

“This is the Day” Mamas Gun
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1JiTkufJgY>

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE
Worship is a time when we,
as a community,
join our hearts together,
to connect to God and to each other.
So this time is the essence of what we do here together.
If you have a prayer that you wish to lift to God,

and have supported by the energy of those gathered here, type it in Nearby Chat at this time.

As people share their prayers in text
please read them prayerfully
and hold this space as sacred and safe
to open our hearts to God.
Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers.

Lord hear our prayers.
Those voiced here today.
Those spoken only in the depths of our hearts.
Those for which we have no words.
We lift them all to you, O Lord,
with faith in your boundless love and grace.
Amen.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

Our worship is over,
our ministry to the world is just beginning.
The world is waiting for you
to follow Jesus through the gates and beyond,
as we move into Lent.
But you won't go alone.
Go in peace,
come again in hope.
Amen.

This is my favorite song to end services in Lent, so you'll hear it again from me,
and maybe, wherever you are,
you might sing along.

"Christ Has Walked" Jeff Johnson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pSaI89weew>

GO IN PEACE!