

"I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life"

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

April 5, 2009

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John 12:12-19 (NRSV)

¹²The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

"Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—
the King of Israel!"

¹⁴Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

¹⁵"Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey's colt!"

¹⁶His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. ¹⁷So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. ¹⁸It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. ¹⁹The Pharisees then said to one another, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!"

John 14:1-7 (NRSV)

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" ⁶Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Though Jesus is welcomed into the city with the waving of palms, it would soon become clear that Jesus' way would be what no one had expected, least of all his disciples. Yet, Jesus would seek to reassure them that he is indeed "the way, the truth, and the life."

We all love a parade. And when we go to a parade we know what we are there to celebrate. It was no different for the residents of Jerusalem who lined the road leading inside the city walls of Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago. They knew what they were there for. The long oppression of the Jews was about to come to an end. God had, at long last, raised up a national hero, God's anointed one, who would lead Israel to freedom from their Roman overseers. It would be a new Exodus!¹

Had the crowds known that Jesus had been anointed with expensive perfume and oil (John 12:1-8) before entering the city, their excitement would have known no bounds. In Hebrew, "Messiah" means "anointed one." But, of course, Jesus had not been anointed as a conquering political hero, he had been anointed for burial. Things were not what they seemed on the parade route.

Who is Jesus?

This is the Palm Sunday question. It is the central question of John's Gospel. It is the question to which all the "I am" statements have been driving us. It was the question

¹We call this Palm Sunday thanks only to the Gospel writer, John. He is the only writer that tells us about palms and explicitly places the welcoming on the Sunday before the Passover.

for Jerusalem 2,000 years ago and it is the question for our world still. But it is a question that we can answer only through the lens of Good Friday and Easter.

The Palm-waving crowds rightly expect that Jesus is God's Messiah, his anointed one. In John's brief telling of Jesus' welcoming, the crowds shout Hosanna, which means "save us" in Hebrew. They sing out "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the king of Israel." This is from Psalm 118, a song of God's victory, the day when God has finally acted. The crowds expect that Jesus is to be a warrior King and that the anticipated violent confrontation with Rome has finally come to a head.

But John help us to grasp that things are not as the crowds expect. The crowds thought they knew Jesus, but they did not (John 1:10). John's quote about the donkey is taken from Zechariah 9:9. This is a passage about the coming ruler of God's people – very messianic in other words. There is much more at work here than even the arrival of God's Messiah.

John changes the opening words of the Zechariah quotation from "*Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion*" to "*Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.*" Here, John evokes

Why "Good" Friday?

I get this question often. It is certainly understandable.

The etymology of the "Good" here is not clear. Some think it comes from "God's Friday." Other scholars believe it simply derives from the German, *Gute Freitag*. But regardless of where the English term came from, the theology of "Good Friday" can be embraced by all Christians.

Calling it "Good Friday" acknowledges that out of the horrible tragedy of Jesus' crucifixion came the greatest possible good – God's victory over sin and death.

Standing at the foot of Jesus' cross on Friday, it would have been impossible to see any good in it at all. Without Easter, Jesus' story would have been a tragedy. The memory of his actions and teachings might have been cherished by his immediate followers, but he would have gone down in history as one of several well-meaning but failed messiahs in the first century.

But Jesus' resurrection meant that he had triumphed over death and, because death was the consequence of sin, he had triumphed over sin as well. Jesus' resurrection meant that God had acted in the present world to restore humanity and all of creation to a right relationship with himself. What could be a greater "good" than that?

Zephaniah 3: ¹⁵"The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more . . . Do not fear, O Zion . . ."

It is not just the Messiah whom the crowds welcome into the city, it is the LORD God himself. God had once been their king and now God would be their king again: God incarnate in Jesus.

Further, centuries before, Ezekiel had brought to the people terrifying visions of God's departure from the temple in Jerusalem before its burning by the Babylonians. In the centuries since, despite the rebuilding of the temple, there wasn't really any sign that God had returned.² The Jews still awaited the fulfillment of God's promise: "See, I am sending a messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" (Malachi 3:1).

What must the crowds of followers have thought when, on the next day, Jesus didn't head for the Antonia Fortress to confront the Romans but to the temple, where he would invoke the words of Jeremiah pronouncing judgment on the people and *their* temple.

²I don't have the space to develop this, but here is the general idea. The Jews believed that their exile to Babylon (their trip to jail) had been punishment for their sin. Though they had returned to the land they were certainly still in jail with the Romans being the latest in a long line of jailers. They would not be released from jail until their sins had been forgiven. The coming of the Day of the Lord, to be ushered in by God's Messiah, would entail such forgiveness and, hence, the restoration of Israel. . . . That's a lot packed into a few sentences, but this is a footnote after all!

“I am the way, the truth, and the life”

After all the tumult in the days after Palm Sunday, Jesus has finally come to the end of his long journey into the mouth of the beast. He has gathered his disciples together for one last meal together. He has washed their feet. And now, only hours away from arrest and crucifixion, Jesus seeks to reassure his disciples. He must go. And they cannot, they will not, follow.

Nonetheless, Jesus tells them to rest their troubled hearts. They can trust him just as they trust God. There are many rooms where Jesus is going, which we often call heaven, and he will prepare a place for each of them. They may not realize it, as Thomas doesn't, but they already know the way to the place where Jesus is going . . . to heaven.

Jesus is the way to this place: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” There is no other way, no other path, only Jesus: “No one comes to the Father except through me.” Jesus is now unambiguously clear about his identity with the Father: “If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” In other words, when they disciples have seen Jesus, they have seen God!

There's something very important to notice about exactly what Jesus says. It is not his way that he is talking about – he *is* the way. He isn't speaking here of living as he lived or loving as he loved – Jesus *is* the way. Just as Jesus is the gateway for the sheep (John 10), he is the path to this place we call heaven.³ Jesus is the way to God because he is the truth of God and the life of God.

For the last couple of centuries, Jesus' simple and profound statement, “I am the way . . . No one comes to the Father except through me” has been endlessly controversial. How arrogant! How exclusive! How divisive! Yet, Jesus' claim and the early Christians' claims about him are made abundantly clear in John's Gospel. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” If this is truly the truth, how could one claim to know God and yet disown Jesus?

When we begin to talk about the Christian truth claims in comparison to other religions and belief systems, the questions always boil down to this: Who is Jesus? As we embark on our journey through Holy Week, we reflect and pray upon the salvation that is Good Friday and the proof that is Easter Sunday. Therein lies the truth about Jesus.

In closing, I share with you a meditation on today's “I am” statement written more than five centuries ago by Thomas à Kempis:

Follow thou me, I am the way and the truth and the life.

Without the way there is no going;
without the truth there is no knowing;
without the life there is no living.

I am the way which thou must follow;
the truth which thou must believe;
the life for which thou must hope.

I am the inviolable way; the infallible truth; the never ending life.
I am the straightest way; the sovereign truth; life true, life blessed, life uncreated.

If thou remain in my way thou shalt know the truth,
and the truth shall make thee free,
and thou shalt lay hold on eternal life.”

³ Jesus will call this place “paradise” when he speaks the next afternoon to a brigand on the cross next to his own (Luke 23:43).

Death and Resurrection

Holy Week leads from Jesus' life to his death and onward to his resurrection. It is a good time to reflect on the biblical understanding of death and the promise of resurrection.

In the opening chapters of Genesis, God creates humans in his own image, giving them a beautiful garden in which to live and work. God warns them not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But they do anyway and the consequences are tragic. God said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever" (Genesis 3:22). Because the rebellious Adam and Eve might grasp immortality for themselves, God banishes them from the garden; they are sent into exile. Thus, in the story, it seems that the humans were created mortal; death of the humans and the animals was a part of God's created order. The exile from the garden precluded the possibility of immortality for the humans. *Caution* – don't read more into this story than is here. There is nothing in the Genesis story about the nature of death, any sort of after-life, nor anything about resurrection. All we are told is that the humans' disobedience, their sin, results in their exile from the garden and that so long as they are in exile, they cannot live forever.

Now, let's fast forward to the time of Jesus. The people of the ancient world knew that the dead stayed dead. For them, if there was any sort of after-life, it was a shadowy existence and generally unpleasant. And they certainly knew that there was no such thing as resurrection. The answer to Job's question, "If mortals die, will they live again?" (14:14) was an emphatic "No!" Yet, among the ancients, the Jews told a different story. By Jesus' day, most Jews did believe in the resurrection of the dead, in death's undoing. If sin had brought banishment from the garden and foreclosed the possibility of living forever, the Jews' expectation was that God would bring them back from exile so that they might live forever in a right and good relationship with God and one another. In essence, upon the coming of God's kingdom, God's people would eat of the tree of life.

After Jesus' resurrection, his followers proclaimed to everyone who would listen that the resurrection of the dead had begun. To the Jews, this claim was puzzling at best because their expectation was that everyone would be raised at the same time. To the non-Jews, the Christians were claiming something that everyone knew simply didn't happen! But for the Christians, Jesus' resurrection meant that death had been undone. Death's defeat meant the exile from the garden had ended which meant sin had been defeated as well, for it was sin that had led to the exile in the first place. Death was now no more than one more stage on our way to an embodied eternity with God and one another.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

In his brief telling of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, John wants us to see that the crowds rightly welcome Jesus as a king, as God's anointed. But he also wants us to see that the crowds do not understand how God's work to redeem them will move forward. They can't imagine that in a few days, this humble donkey-riding Messiah will be dead on a cross. There was *zero* expectation of a suffering Messiah. They think they know what their problem is and how to fix it (a warrior King) – but only because they were listening to the world, not to God.

When we welcome Jesus into our congregation, into our lives, what do we expect? Are we really ready to embrace Jesus as "the way, the truth, and the life?" We Americans are a pragmatic lot. We want to know how to fix what is wrong. Our theology too often devolves into "if it works, it must be true." But is this all there is to the Gospel? Granted we have problems, but the biblical view is that we often can't name the problems or diagnose them properly, much less put things right. Sin causes us to look at our lives through the lens of this world, rather than the lens of Good Friday and Easter.

It is important to see that saying Jesus is the way is not the same as saying that we desire to live in his way. Do you understand the difference? How would you put this in your own words? Scripture is more focused on the latter, as Marva Dawn puts it, shaping us into people who follow *on* the Jesus way *in* Jesus' way. As Jesus says just a few verses after today's reading, "the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do." How can we hold together our belief that Jesus is the way and our desire to live in his way?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. In 2007, the Lenten sermon series was drawn from John's Gospel. We read through the Gospel that year and the daily readings for this Lent will again take us through the entire Gospel.

<p>Monday, John 12:12-50 Jesus enters Jerusalem as the triumphant returning king, using OT images and references to stake his messianic claims.</p>	<p>Tuesday, John 13 Jesus tries to prepare his disciples for what is to come. Why do you think he uses foot-washing? Why don't the disciples stop Judas?</p>
<p>Wednesday, John 14 This chapter begins Jesus' last and longest discourse. How would you summarize what Jesus has to say about (1) where he is going and (2) the promise of the Holy Spirit.</p>	<p>Thursday, John 15:1-16:4 What does the image of Jesus as the true vine and we as the branches convey to you? What does it mean to abide in Christ? What does Jesus mean when he says it is better to be hated by the world than to be loved by it?</p>
<p>Friday, John 16:5-33 How could Jesus' going away possibly be to the disciples' advantage (16:7)? How is it that the disciples' sorrow will turn into joy?</p>	<p>Saturday, John 17 This is Jesus' farewell prayer on behalf of his disciples. How would you summarize this prayer? Note that Jesus is praying for his future disciples as well (17:20). Why does he do this?</p>

