



CROSS TRAINING:
What price would you pay to get a (real) life?

Week Six:
Downward Nobility
Luke 19:28-40

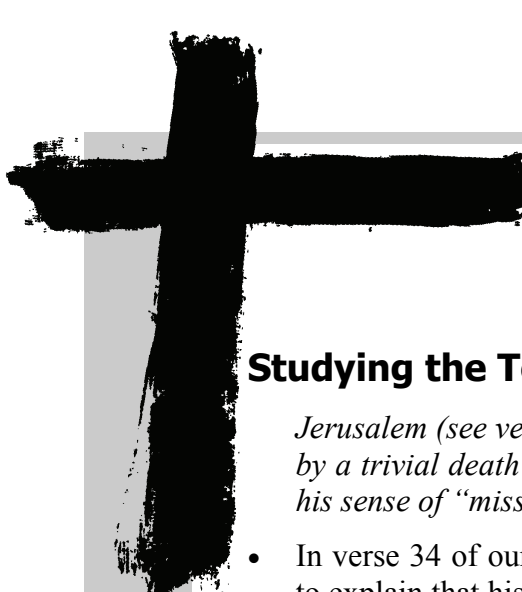
Preparing for the Text

For six weeks our Lenten journey has followed in the footsteps of Jesus as he sets his face (see Luke 9:51) and travels insistently toward a final and fateful confrontation in Jerusalem. Now we are also set to enter into our own commemoration of the Passion of Jesus with Holy Week services that begin with a Palm Sunday account of the Messiah's arrival at Jerusalem. Trusting that the Gospel stories we will hear during this Holy Week carry their own power, in this session we will turn our attention toward some of the quiet and often overlooked details of the narrative. And in preparation for our study of these small but significant features in Luke's account, take time in your class or small group to reflect on one or more of the following discussion starters:

- Let's assume for a moment that all of us are responsible to perform at least a few ordinary tasks or duties that we perhaps find quite tedious, boring and completely devoid of glamour and significance. In the days since our last gathering, what job or chore turned out to be the most unappealing item on your personal "to-do" list, and what did you do to convince yourself to finally complete this task?
- What is your favorite and most effective technique for "killing time" when you are choosing to procrastinate by putting off a job that really must be done?
- If you ever felt that it was immediately and absolutely necessary for you to "get away from it all," where would you go and why would you find that destination so appealing?

Studying the Text:

Any reader paying close attention to the narrative of Luke's Gospel is likely to notice that on six separate occasions the storyteller mentions that Jesus and his disciples are "on the way" toward Jerusalem after Jesus resolves to do so in Luke 9:51. Using this literary signal seems to ratchet up the sense of dramatic tension, and by the time we reach the passage we will study in this present session it is clear that Jesus has come to the holy city of Jerusalem for a final "showdown" with the powerful forces presumably seeking to bring his life and ministry to an end. And in fact, on three occasions Jesus has already openly predicted his own rejection, suffering and death during the course of this journey to Jerusalem. Knowing that these pointed reminders regarding the suffering that Jesus will soon experience frame the final stage of his pilgrimage to the city, read the text of Luke 19:28-40 aloud with your group before discussing the following study questions:

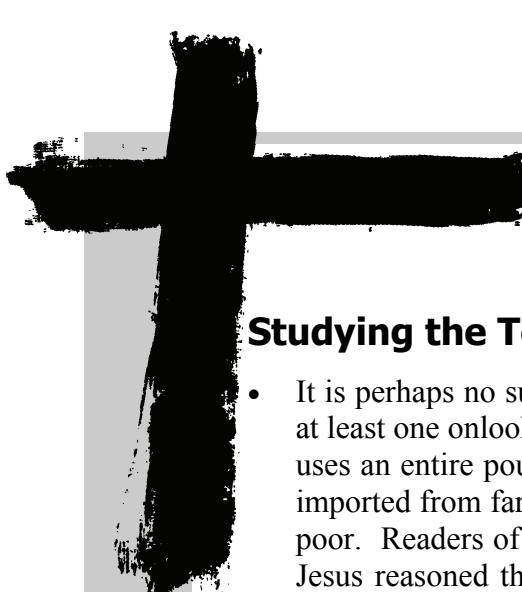


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Studying the Text (continued):

- At the beginning of Luke 19, Jesus is in Jericho, the lowest inhabited place on earth at over 800 feet below sea level. Only about a dozen miles away, Jerusalem is at 3,000 feet *above* sea level. In other words, the path Jesus has traveled in our present text has taken him through the Judean desert almost straight up to the top of the Mount of Olives, where for the first time a pilgrim traveling to the holy city would see the final destination with a sense of relief that the long hard climb was nearly over. But on the Mount of Olives (verse 29), a hot, tired pilgrim like Jesus could also choose to bypass the dangers and unfamiliar urban setting of Jerusalem by returning to the lush countryside of Galilee. Quite literally, the geographical setting of our text positions Jesus at a point of decision: will he follow his own sense of God-given destiny by entering Jerusalem despite all its apparent threats of violence and suffering, or will he choose the route of safety and security by turning his back on Jerusalem, returning to his home region of Galilee? It is this background full of foreboding and tension that Luke has given us when he stops to recount the very detailed instructions Jesus gives in sending two of his disciples to secure for him “a colt that has never been ridden” (verses 30-31). Many will perhaps already recognize, understand and remember the apparent prophetic symbolism associated with this “mode of transportation” for Jesus as he prepares to enter Jerusalem. But still, it may strike some as odd that with all this drama in our text, the storyteller spends so much time remembering with precision all of the small details regarding the instructions Jesus has given to two of his unnamed disciples. One might even argue that the job of securing a colt for Jesus does not seem to be terribly important or significant in the grand scheme of things, and we are probably meant to notice that the Lord does not actually *explain* to the two who serve on his “transportation detail” what he intends to *do* with the colt. *As you think about the choice Jesus is making to enter Jerusalem despite its threat, what do you make of the strange way the text pays so much attention to relatively minute details regarding the procurement of a colt that has never been ridden? Has the Lord ever given you a similarly “odd job” with little or no explanation, and what do you recall about your feelings when you compared the apparently insignificant task you were responsible to accomplish with the far more important matters that you might have been wondering about at the time?*
- As we have already suggested, by choosing to ride on a colt (presumably a lowly, humble animal symbolizing that Jesus comes in peace rather than riding on a war horse like a conquering hero) Jesus is apparently sending a clear message about his intentions as a Messianic figure embodying the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9-10. It appears that his disciples comprehend this symbolism, for they begin to spread their cloaks on the colt and on the ground (verses 35-36), in effect making the whole procession into Jerusalem something of a poor man’s ticker-tape parade by welcoming Jesus as if he is royalty. Finally, according to verses 37-38, the crowd of disciples chants a portion of Psalm 118 traditionally used by pilgrims entering Jerusalem. As the renowned New Testament scholar N. T. Wright reminds us, the disciples are singing “a song of victory, a hymn of praise to the God who defeats all his foes and establishes his kingdom.” But you might also recognize the final phrase on the lips of the cheering disciples as the same song heard earlier in the Gospel of Luke when angels proclaimed the news of Messiah’s birth to shepherds keeping watch over their flocks (see Luke 2:14): “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven (verse 38)!” In other words, the same words of celebration we heard at the birth of Jesus are now introducing the final movement of his ministry as he makes his way to a Roman cross at Golgotha. We may be



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Studying the Text (continued):

marking Palm Sunday in our Lenten journey, but Luke might be reminding us that our Christmas messages about “peace on earth and goodwill among humankind” require a very costly and painful Good Friday price! The “royal treatment” Jesus receives is just the culmination of his long and obedient journey to the cross, for he enters the city in humility as a servant who is willing to die just as he has lived – sacrificially. *If this reading of our text is right, what does it mean to you that the entire life of the Lord Jesus has been lived from beginning to end under the words “Glory to God in the highest, may there be peace on earth and good will toward all people”? Is this chant an appropriate set of “marching orders” for your life as well, and if so, what needs to be different if you are to truly and deeply commit every step of your journey to walking “the Jesus way” as one resolved to live to the glory of God by making peace on earth and reconciliation for all people a reality here and now?*

- As we might expect, the exuberant celebration surrounding Jesus as he prepares to enter Jerusalem evokes criticism by some in the crowd (see verse 39). But Jesus refuses to silence the praise of his disciples. *What do you think Jesus means when he tells his critics in verse 40 that if the disciples were to fall silent, “the stones would shout out?” In what ways are we to “shout” to the world around us that in Jesus a new king has come and a “new world order” has now been initiated?*

Applying the Text:

We’ve hinted in this study session that the Gospel storyteller may be attempting to connect the apparently insignificant assignment of some unnamed “donkey fetchers” with the “big picture” of obedience evident when Jesus chooses to complete his journey to Jerusalem. Sometimes we miss this type of theological connection, forgetting that the details of our relatively small and often unseen responsibility to enact and embody true obedience can and does play a part in the much bigger work of salvation and holiness that Jesus is accomplishing in our world. Jesus knew that he was needed in Jerusalem, but we may at times wonder whether or not the tasks demanding our immediate attention are of any real importance or lasting significance. Luke seems to insist that we are actually “in on something crucial” even if it does not seem so at first glance. Even when it seems that we are nothing more than “donkey fetchers,” the “little obedience” that we may be asked to offer (perhaps even without any sort of satisfying explanation from the Lord) can still contribute significantly in establishing the larger, holy purposes of Jesus and his reign. No matter where you are at present, your calling is to see the dignity of your job as “royal work” honoring Jesus who intends to come near to claim the praise rightly due his name.

Praying the Text:

As we conclude our Lenten study, take time in your group to allow anyone who wishes to receive prayer ministry to share the concern or request for which a new gift of grace from God is needed. In light of our study in this session, some may wish to pray for a new sense of the Spirit’s empowerment in their work, sensing that it has been far too long since they could affirm the significance of their contributions in obedience to Jesus.