

WESTMINSTER
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CHURCH



SERMON

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Crossing Thresholds

Dr. Jo Forrest

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We are coming full circle in the Gospel of Luke. Last December, we read the opening chapters. While pregnant, Mary sings her son will “scatter the proud in their thoughts...bring down the powerful...and lift up the lowly.” It is a song of revolution.

When she and Joseph present their infant in the Jerusalem temple, an old priest takes Jesus in his arms, is awed by the long-awaited messiah, and then warns, “this child is destined for the falling and rising of many...and to be a sign to be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.”

The writer of the Gospel of Luke situates Jesus’ birth at a very particular time and place: under the reign of King Herod in Judea.

Advent and Christmas seem ages ago for so very many reasons, but let’s not lose sight that God takes on human flesh to confront the corrupt leaders and to usher in a new era for all humans to thrive.

Our reading today marks the culmination of Jesus’ three-year ministry. The story is reaching a fever pitch as all Jesus’ goodness provokes those in power to plot his death.

Dear God, this story of Palm Sunday seems so familiar. We wave palm branches to imagine the joy when he crossed the threshold of the city gates. Rather than let the noise of the parade deafen us to his message, send your spirit among us that we hear you speak in these holy words. Amen.

Luke 19

²⁸ After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

²⁹ When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples,

³⁰ saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'"

³² So those who were sent departed and found it as Jesus had told them.

³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴ They said, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵ Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road.

³⁷ As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸ saying,

"Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!”

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him,
“Teacher, order your disciples to stop.”

⁴⁰ Jesus answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the
stones would shout out.”

⁴¹ As he came near and saw the city, he wept over
it, ⁴² saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on
this day the things that make for peace! But now they
are hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ Indeed, the days will
come upon you, when your enemies will set up
ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in
on every side. ⁴⁴ They will crush you to the ground, you
and your children within you, and they will not leave
within you one stone upon another; because you did
not recognize the time of your visitation from God.”

Beef bourguignon. Crepes. Quiche. Coq au Vin. I don't mean to
make you hungry, merely remind you of the French fare
commonly found on menus and dinner tables, today in the US.
Almost as common as pot roast, pancakes, or stewed chicken.

We credit Julia Child and her colleagues for their trailblazing
work to publish *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* in 1961. I
personally attest to the clarity of her recipes and rely upon her
optimism when cooking. Even a novice in the kitchen can pick

up the book, follow her instructions, and feast. That was her intent, to bring French cooking to the everyday dinner table.

For those of you following the series on HBO Max entitled *Julia*, you know she is not French, a writer, or a chef. Yet, her passion to publish this book propelled the editors of Knopf to take a risk alongside their stable of literary writers such as John Updike. Much to the elites' surprise, her book sold.

But not enough for Julia Child. She sought to promote the ease of cooking and literally willed nascent public television station to pilot a show. Almost everyone and everything was stacked against her.

When told "no," she readily admitted she learned to persist from having been told "no" her whole life by those who thought her ideas unsuitable and her physical appearance unacceptable.

Each barrier placed in her path, she worked to crossover. Her passion kept her focused. And it became infectious. Without the benefit of Instagram or publicists a fan club materialized and swelled in size. Each success begat more for everyone involved. You'd anticipate she'd welcome the accolades after working so hard. Yet, in a recent episode of the turning point from a dream becoming reality, her countenance darkens.

She shuns the burgeoning mail. Obviously uncomfortable, she confides to her husband, "I am scared." Having watched her

impact on others, for years, he replies you are not teaching people to cook, I quote, “you are teaching them to taste life.”¹

Undoubtedly, we gravitate to people who encourage us to come alive. Who turn life from drudgery into an adventure. Who believe in our abilities. Who inspire us to swing out in life and get back up after we fail. She’d be the first to admit how often she dropped the omelet or flung a chicken leg across the kitchen. And you just keep at it.

We love success stories of those whom no one would expect to change the world and yet who do so in ways that invite us to try and change our individual lives for the better.

Jesus started out as an itinerant rabbi. Over the course of his ministry, he attracted followers from across all walks of life – truly unimagined in a society that built and defended clear divisions of tribe, economics, and religion. His ministry taught them to think differently about themselves. To know they were created in God’s image with inherent capacities to thrive. To cross the divides separating them from the “other.” When embraced by him, people experienced a freedom as never before.

As he amassed more followers, it threatened those who had depended upon the unchanging status quo.

¹ Daniel Goldfarb, Julia, HBO Max, “Petit Fours,” Episode 4, 42:07.

As a confrontation festers, he heads straight into the heartbeat of politics, economics, and religion. Those who ruled Jerusalem and the Roman Empire relied upon a three-part system of domination. Very simple and interconnected.

Caesar, Herod, the elites – including religious elites – kept their positions as long as very few of them wielded any power. The first rule of domination is for a very limited number of people to be in control.

They increased their power as by widening the wealth gap and pushing down into poverty any who might have existed as middle-class citizens. With their authority, they taxed the “middle-class,” who were self-sustaining farmers, out of their property. By concentrating wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer people, they kept control.

The third leg of the stool of domination was to sanction one religion to control the hearts and minds and habits of the people.

Into this system of domination, Jesus and his disciples enter Jerusalem.

Historians speculate that Jesus knew exactly what he was doing when he chose the celebration of Passover for the climax of his mission. Every year during Passover – Jerusalem's Jewish population exploded from its usual 50,000 residents to at least 200,000 people. At that time, partly as

crowd control, the Roman governor of Judea would ride up to Jerusalem from his coastal residence. He flashed imperial majesty with chariots, horses, and warriors brandishing weapons.

This annual parade reminded the Jewish pilgrims that Rome demanded their complete loyalty. The Jewish people could commemorate their Passover victory against Egypt and slavery if they wanted to. But if they attempted to resist, they would be obliterated.²

After years of walking, Jesus will ride the final mile. Luke's gospel tells the story of Jesus sending his disciples ahead to find a colt. Untie it. The verb "untie" appears five times, perhaps foreshadowing the way he will untie us from servitude.

He mounts the colt and crosses the threshold into the city of Jerusalem, just as the prophet Zechariah foretold

Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey...
and he shall command peace to the nations...

Unlike the Romans, Jesus came without weapons. Riding on a colt, with an almost comical appearance, he established his

² Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006).

brand of peace through humility and love. Crowds inundated to him.

Anyone who seeks to overthrow a government does not ride into a city with such fanfare – only victors do so. Jesus rides as if he has already claimed his conquest over Herod and over the cross.

As Pilate crossed the threshold into Jerusalem from the west, Jesus approached from the east.

Only the Gospel of Luke depicts Jesus' emotions as he enters Jerusalem. He weeps. Fully human and fully divine, he weeps. As he enters the city, he weeps in anguish and in fear, for the people of a city who could not and would not embrace God's simple way of peace.

That day everyone in Jerusalem had choice to make. Cross the threshold with Pilate and play the game "go along to get along" with the way things always were. Hail Rome. Applaud Pilate. Keep his peace by cowering to the dictator. Or take a risk and join with the one who seeks the best for each person, who will literally die for all to witness the power of God's love to overturn death.

William Barclay, Scottish New Testament scholar, once commented that there are two kinds of courage. There is the kind of courage that prompts someone to throw him or herself in the way of an oncoming car to push a child to safety. It is the

kind of bravery that is instinctual and is revealed in the moment of crisis.

And there is also the kind of courage that sees danger coming a long way off, that has plenty of time to choose an alternative path, yet stays the course, to remain faithful, to endure the mounting fear in order to do what one knows is right. It is this second kind of courage we see in Jesus. He knows what lies ahead of him. He has seen it coming all his life. He has plenty of opportunity to go the opposite direction. Yet he does not. He stays the course, endures the fear, pursues his divine peace.³

Jesus' courage was fueled by the confidence God would have the final word when the world's savagery executes the innocent. Death becomes new life. Military might gives way to peace.

Courage is always tinged with fear and nay sayers. When you step out, despite feeling alone, you may be the spark to inspire others to come alive. When you step out to do with work of Christ, to feed the hungry, include those long derided, you will upset the powerful. But that is the way to dismantle the terrors that masquerade as peace. Have courage, he is always with you. He has shown you the way.

³ The Church of Scotland, *Weekly Worship*, <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/worship/weekly-worship/monthly/april-2022/10-april-6th-sunday-in-lent>



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2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630
www.westminster-church.org