

Poverty Initiative

Bible Studies & Devotionals

For more information:
Poverty Initiative
At Union Theological Seminary
3041 Broadway, New York, NY 10027
poverty@povertyinitiative.org
(212) 280-1439
www.povertyinitiative.org

“And your daughters will Prophecy”: Reflecting on Women’s Contributions to the Jesus Movement

Read John 12:1-11

If asked to name who were the first followers of Jesus or the first leaders of Christianity most would name: Peter (the rock), John (the disciple that Jesus loved), or even the Apostle Paul (who spread Christianity throughout the Roman Empire). Though all of these men played important roles in establishing the church the first person to actually figure out the full capacity of who Jesus was and act on this knowledge was a woman named Mary by anointing Jesus with her alabaster jar of perfume that was worth a year’s salary this woman was not just serving Jesus with a random act of kindness but she was acknowledging who he was and what he was about to undergo. She was the first Christian and a leader because she had the vision to see and act on the totality of who Jesus was. Her action was actually a prophecy without words. Though most men of his day would not have acknowledged her service, Jesus actually advocates for her when Judas (for his own selfish reasons) criticizes her “wastefulness”. Jesus also says some curious and difficult words: “the poor will always be with you”. Though this comment from Jesus may discourage some from working to end poverty, could it be possible that Jesus made this statement more as a condemnation of the disciples’ behavior and not as a commentary on whether it is possible to end poverty. We have to be a careful to not read this comment out of the context of Jesus’ entire ministry, where in his inaugural sermon he declared that he came to “preach good news to the poor”. This passage also shows us the importance of women in the ministry and life of Jesus-Martha was present at this event because she planned the dinner where the anointing occurred. Women were not a side bar in the ministry of Christ but played an essential role, by hosting, fundraising and completing many other tasks that facilitated the spread of Christianity. The sin of sexism prevents many women from serving in leadership roles but throughout history we see examples of women who like Mary navigated around the confines of their times: Deborah the Old Testament Prophetess, Queen Esther, the women of the National Welfare Rights Movement, Harriet Tubman, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and even Mary Mother of Jesus. These women worked for freedom in various ways and had the vision to prophesy to the injustices of their day. God can use anyone regardless of the conventions of culture.

Prayer: God help me to truly see you and your children for who they are, help me to prophesy with whatever I have—whether it be words, hospitality, resources, or time. Give me a vision that is larger than societal expectations so that the poor will not always be with us.

Entry into Jerusalem and Poor People's Campaign Mule Train

Bible passage – Luke 19:28–41 (or Mark 11:1–11)

King passage – Nonviolence and Social Change excerpt on “New and Unsettling Force”

Other references – John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg's,

The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem (2007)

Luke 19:29–41 (New International Version) Jesus' Triumphant Entry

29 As he came to the towns of Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives, he sent two disciples ahead. 30 “Go into that village over there,” he told them. “As you enter it, you will see a young donkey tied there that no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 31 If anyone asks, ‘Why are you untying that colt?’ just say, ‘The Lord needs it.’” 32 So they went and found the colt, just as Jesus had said. 33 And sure enough, as they were untying it, the owners asked them, “Why are you untying that colt?” 34 And the disciples simply replied, “The Lord needs it.” 35 So they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their garments over it for him to ride on. 36 As he rode along, the crowds spread out their garments on the road ahead of him. 37 When he reached the place where the road started down the Mount of Olives, all of his followers began to shout and sing as they walked along, praising God for all the wonderful miracles they had seen. 38 “Blessings on the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in highest heaven!” 39 But some of the Pharisees among the crowd said, “Teacher, rebuke your followers for saying things like that!” 40 He replied, “If they kept quiet, the stones along the road would burst into cheers!”

Martin Luther King Jr. Trumpet of Conscience (1967) “Nonviolence and Social Change”

“The dispossessed of this nation---the poor, both white and Negro-live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against the injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty...”

“...There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life...”

Reflection

In Luke 19:28-41 we read the familiar but unusual passage about the “Triumphant Entry” from which we derive our Palm Sunday celebrations. Jesus does not enter Jerusalem in the same way as the religious and political leaders of his day; instead he enters on a donkey. To spite this extremely humble entry the people crown him their King and praise God for him. Though Jesus was not declared King by the Roman Empire peasants bestowed this title on him, and every Palm Sunday thousands of years later in churches across the world we echo their words.

This short but powerful passage gives us important insight into the agency of poor people to name themselves and to claim for themselves dignity outside the confines of the principalities and powers of their day. Throughout history we have examples of poor people who arise and claim dignity for themselves.

Could the Triumphant Entry be but one example of the many instances in which poor people organized themselves-peasants in Jerusalem organized around Jesus their declared King, slaves gathered in hush harbors and in 1968 poor people of all races from across America organized around the Poor People's Campaign-beginning with a Mule Train from Marks, Mississippi (sound familiar).

The Poor People's Campaign was the last project of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and much like the poor of Jesus day who risked persecution by proclaiming Jesus as their King because they had nothing to loose but bondage to the Roman Empire, the poor of Dr. King's day risked it all to converge on the nation's capital to challenge the American empire because they had nothing to loose but bondage to an economic system that robbed them of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

God places the desire for freedom within all of his children and just as he provided the donkey for Jesus' triumphant entry, if we step out in faith with the freedom and power that Dr. King prophesied about in 1967, we too will have everything we need to obtain the liberation provided by our creator. As the gospel songs of old declared-“God is no

respector of persons what he did for others he can do for you too.”

Questions for Reflection

- What do these stories of triumphant entries tell us about the nature of God and his desire for justice and liberation?
- Do you see a connection between the donkey in Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem and the mule train in MLK’s Poor People’s Campaign?
- In what ways do we allow our fears of not being enough or having enough (money, talents, etc) stop us from doing God’s work of justice?
- This Lent what is one small way can you step out on faith and trust that God will provide you with what you need to be an advocate for justice?

Prayer: God, give me the faith and courage to step out and stand for justice trusting that you will provide me with all I need to do your work. In the name of Jesus our liberator - yesterday, today and forever, Amen.

The Last Week of Jesus and the Last Year of Martin Luther King

Women in the Movement

Choose one or two activities from each category that best fit your group and your context. Adapt the activities to fit your needs.

Focus (exploring our current experience of this area of our lives):

- 1.) Have each participant think of an influential woman in their life, either someone they know personally or someone whose public work has significantly impacted their life. Write down three qualities of that woman. Share in small groups. What did the women do that exemplified these qualities? Why are these qualities significant?
- 2.) Take a walk around your church building. Note all of the places that women work within the church (i.e., the pulpit, the kitchen, the nursery, the board room, etc). Did you think of places and work that women do that goes unnoticed? Why is that work so often hidden from our consciousness? How can we do a better job of honoring the work that women do in our churches?
- 3.) Pass out pictures and a brief biography of women involved in social movements, historically and currently, locally and globally. (Perhaps we would either suggest names of these women or include pictures and the biography as part of this packet.) In small groups have each person introduce the woman in their picture. Reflect on the common characteristics of these women. How were the respective social movements transformed by the involvement of these women?

Join the Story (encountering the Bible and learning from those who have gone before)

- 1.) Engage in Lectio Divina with the story from John 12:1-11.
- 2.) Read the excerpt from Crossan and Borg (found in the material we used on the immersion trip). What role does Mary play in Jesus' ministry according to John's gospel? (See also John 11 and John 20). What do you think Mary's relationship with Judas might have been? With the other disciples?
- 3.) George Wiley piece

Challenge (stretching ourselves to live more faithfully)

As a church community or organization publicly honor a woman who has served and led. Examples of this could be acknowledging her in worship, a newsletter or giving her a certificate of appreciation get creative as the Bible says "give honor to who honor is due".

Worship (offering God thanks and praise)

During personal prayer time thank God for the women in your life who have encouraged, inspired, led and served you.

Link (related websites, videos, music, books and other resources)

Poverty Initiative: <http://www.povertyinitiative.org>

National Welfare Rights Union: <http://www.nationalwru.org>

Jesus Christ Superstar Everything's Alright Song Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5QYmG2qoyY>

Serving

As a group collect fragrances or perfume and deliver to a senior citizen center.

Readings

Crossan and Borg, *The Last Week*

"She (the woman who anoints Jesus) is, for Mark, the first believer. She is, for us, the first Christian. And she believed from the word of Jesus before any discovery of an empty tomb. Furthermore, her action was a graphic demonstration of the paradoxical leadership cited by Jesus for himself and all his followers on the model of child, servant and slave... The unnamed woman is not only the first believer; she is also the model leader... She was both one of those 'many other women' and the first and only one who believed what Jesus had been telling... The unnamed woman represents the perfect disciple-leader and is contrasted with Judas, who represents the worst one possible." (104-105) "There were also women

looking on from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem. (Mark 15:40-41) “From what is said about Mary Magdalene in other gospels, she was the most important of Jesus’s women followers. About the other Mary, ‘the mother of James the younger and of Joseph,’ we know nothing. About the third woman, we can say only that Salome was a common woman’s name in the first century. The presence of the women reminds us that Jesus’s men followers are not present. They have all fled. Perhaps it was safer for women to be nearby; they were less likely to be suspected by the authorities of being dangerous subversives. Whatever the reason, in Mark (and all the gospels) women play a major role in the story of Good Friday and Easter. They witness Jesus’s death. They follow his body after his death and see where he is buried. In all the gospels, they are the first ones to go to the tomb on Sunday and experience the news of Easter. In Mark, as we shall see in our chapter on Easter Sunday, they are the only ones. The role of women in Mark’s story of Good Friday raises an interesting question. Why would first-century Jewish women (and slightly later, gentile women) be attracted to Jesus? For the same reasons that first century men were, yes. But in addition it seems clear that Jesus and earliest Christianity gave to women an identity and status that they did not experience within the conventional wisdom of the time. Women in both Jewish and gentile cultures were subordinated in many ways. Jesus and the early Christian movement subverted the conventional wisdom about women among both Jews and gentiles. The subversion has been denied by much of Christian history, but it is right here, in a prominent place in the story of the climactic events of Jesus’s life; Good Friday and Easter.” (151-152)

A Passion for Equality: George Wiley and the Movement

In early February, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., was coming to Chicago to meet with Wiley and his executive board – at NWRO’s demand. It promised to be a showdown. King was planning a “Poor People’s Campaign” for Washington, D.C. – a tactic born in desperation, as the civil rights movement was in shreds. King had failed, during the previous two years, to solve the riddle of further effective action against northern racism and poverty. The new campaign called for thousands of the poor to encamp in Washington, dramatizing the issues for Congress and the country. The campaign needed foot soldiers. Wiley had them – ten thousand paying members in one hundred functioning chapters – and felt that King was trying to divert NWRO members to the Poor People’s Campaign with any recognition of NWRO and its own purposes, program, and strategy. When King walked through the lobby of the downtown Chicago YMCA on February 3, 1968, he was immediately surrounded by admirers – a crowd seeking to glimpse or touch the famous, charismatic leader. He moved upstairs, with his lieutenants – Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, Bernard Lafayette, and Al Sampson – to a meeting-room where Wiley and his thirty-member committee sat waiting. There were place-cards around the big rectangular table so that Johnnie Tillmon would be seated in the center, with Wiley on her right and Dr. King on her left. King would be separated from his lieutenants, who were surrounded in each corner by the welfare-recipient leadership. Tim Sampson characterized Wiley’s seating arrangement as ‘a grand piece of psychological warfare.’ To the ladies, King and the SCLC’s Poor People’s Campaign was a threat. They were angry that King’s lieutenants had moved around the country contacting local welfare rights groups, asking them to join the banner at the cost of abandoning their own welfare-organizing efforts. ‘The women’s concern was that they had a major constituency organization,’ said Sampson. ‘They had created it with their blood, sweat, and tears, and it was something magnificent to them. Not to be recognized was an attack on their very being. And to have it taken away was unthinkable.’ While Johnnie Tillmon presided, holding her grandchild in her lap, King waited quietly until each woman introduced herself. He then began to describe the purposes of the forthcoming Washington campaign. ‘We need your support,’ he concluded. Then Etta Horn opened the barrage: ‘How do you stand on P.L. 90-248?’ Puzzled, Dr. King looked toward the Reverend Andrew Young, his executive director. ‘She means the Anti-Welfare bill, H.R. 12080, passed by the Congress on December 15, and signed into law by Lyndon Baines Johnson on January 2,’ interrupted Mrs. Tillmon. ‘Where were you last October, when we were down in Washington trying to get support for Senator Kennedy’s amendments?’ Beulah Sanders held up a copy of the NWRO pamphlet *The Kennedy Welfare Amendments*. King was bewildered by the technical discussion of the new law as his staff tried to fend off the women’s hostile questions. Finally, Johnnie Tillmon said, “You now, Dr. King, if you don’t know about these questions, you should say you don’t know, and then we could go on with the meeting.” ‘You’re right, Mrs. Tillmon,’ King replied. ‘We don’t know anything about welfare. We are here to learn.’ The NWRO members proceeded to bring Dr. King up to date on the history of what they saw as welfare repression in Congress and the nation. (248-249)

Feedback-What works in this Bible Study? What does not work? Do you have suggestions for ways to improve the study or ideas for additional resources to include? If so email Onleilove Alston at oa2145@columbia.edu. The Poverty Initiative is currently working on a Bible Study/Devotional collection and your feedback will help us design it effectively.

The Last Week of Jesus and the Last Year of Martin Luther King:

Entry into Jerusalem (on a mule) and Poor People's Campaign Mule Train (study format modeled after "Way to Live" series)

Choose one or two activities from each category that best fit your group and your context. Adapt the activities to fit your needs.

Focus (exploring our current experience of this area of our lives):

- 1.) Have each participant think of an event from history (or the present) where people gathered together to protest injustice. Write down two or three facts about this event. What was significant about this event? Share with the group. What can we learn from these events?
- 2.) View a slide show or pass around pictures of the nation's capital-The White House, The Lincoln Memorial, The Washington Monument, The Supreme Court, etc. What impressions do these sites give you? Do they look welcoming? Who can enter into the White House, Supreme Court or Senate buildings? Why are only certain people given access to these parts of our nation's capital?
- 3.) Show a clip of Jesus entering Jerusalem on the Mule Train from a film about the life of Jesus and a video clip or picture of the Poor People's Campaign Mule Train. Why would Jesus enter Jerusalem on a mule? Why did the Poor People's Campaign have a Mule Train? Have a discussion about the similarities of Jesus entry into Jerusalem and the Poor People's Campaign Mule Train entering Washington, DC, what do these similarities teach us?

Join the Story (encountering the Bible and learning from those who have gone before)

- 1.) Engage in Lectio Divina with the story from Luke 19: 28-41
- 2.) Read the excerpt from King passage – Nonviolence and Social Change excerpt on "New and Unsettling Force" and from Crossan and Borg (see readings below). What role does Dr. King think poor people can play in ending poverty?
- 3.) Parallel stories in the gospels- Mark 11:1-11
- 4.) Read Crossan and Borg, The Last Week (found in MLK Textual Reflection)

Challenge (stretching ourselves to live more faithfully)

Visit a local community organization or non-profit that is led by those directly affected by the issue they are working on-examples: a Welfare Rights Group, tutoring program led by youth, homeless organization or soup kitchen led by currently or formally homeless people. Don't limit yourself to these examples but look for organizations that fit the description that are unique to your community.

Worship

Take palm branches and use them in worship

Sing the worship song Hosanna by Hill songs- video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=we4t0fAnGBA>

Link (related websites, videos, music, books and other resources)

The Poverty Initiative: <http://www.povertyinitiative.org>

Israel Houghton-The Power of One-Contemporary Gospel Album around the theme of Social Justice:
<http://www.newbreedmusic.com>

Jesus Christ Superstar Scene of Jesus entering Jerusalem YouTube video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=feWcodU51QY>

The MLK Center for Non-Violence-www.thekingcenter.org

Readings

Martin Luther King Jr. "Nonviolence and Social Change" *Trumpet of Conscience* (1967)

"There is a fire raging now for ... the poor of this society... Disinherited people all over the world are bleeding to death from deep social and economic wounds. They need brigades of ambulance drivers who will have to ignore the red lights of the present system until the emergency is solved..." "The dispossessed of this nation---the poor, both white and Negro-live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against the injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty..." "...There are millions of poor people in this country who have very

little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life..."

Crossan and Borg, *The Last Week*

"Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year. In the centuries since, Christians have celebrated this day as Palm Sunday, the first day of Holy Week. With its climax of Good Friday and Easter, it is the most sacred week of the Christian year. One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers, Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class. They had journeyed to Jerusalem from Galilee, about a hundred miles to the north, a journey that is the central section and the central dynamic of Mark's gospel. Mark's story of Jesus and the kingdom of God has been aiming for Jerusalem, pointing toward Jerusalem. It has now arrived. On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus's procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus's crucifixion. Pilate's military procession was a demonstration of both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology. Though unfamiliar to most people today, the imperial procession was well known in the Jewish homeland in the first century. Mark and the community for which he wrote would have known about it, for it was the standard practice of the Roman governors of Judea to be in Jerusalem for the major Jewish festivals. They did so not out of empathetic reverence for the religious devotion of their Jewish subjects, but to be in the city in case there was trouble. There often was, especially at Passover, a festival that celebrated the Jewish people's liberation from an earlier empire. The mission of the troops with Pilate was to reinforce the Roman garrison permanently stationed in the Fortress Antonia, overlooking the Jewish temple and its courts. They and Pilate had come up from Caesarea Maritima, "Caesarea on the Sea," about sixty miles to the west. Like the Roman governors of Judea and Samaria before and after him, Pilate lived in the new and splendid city on the coast. For them, it was much more pleasant than Jerusalem, the traditional capital of the Jewish people, which was inland and insular, provincial and partisan, and often hostile. But for the major Jewish festivals, Pilate, like his predecessors and successors, went to Jerusalem. Imagine the imperial procession's arrival in the city. A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums, The swirling of dust, The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful. Pilate's procession displayed not only imperial power, but also Roman imperial theology. According to this theology, the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome, but the Son of God. It began with the greatest of the emperors, Augustus, who ruled Rome from 31 BCE to 14 CE, His father was the god Apollo, who conceived him in his mother, Atia, Inscriptions refer to him as "son of God," "lord" and "savior," one who had brought "peace on earth." After his death, he was seen ascending into heaven to take his permanent place among the gods. His successors continued to bear divine titles, including Tiberius, emperor from 14 to 37 CE and thus emperor during the time of Jesus's public activity, For Rome's Jewish subjects, Pilate's procession embodied not only a rival social order, but also a rival theology. We return to the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem. Although it is familiar, it has surprises... It is a prearranged "counterprocession," Jesus planned it in advance. As Jesus approaches the city from the east at the end of the journey from Galilee, he tells two of his disciples to go to the next village and get him a colt they will find there, one that has never been ridden, that is, a young one. They do so, and Jesus rides the colt down the Mount of Olives to the city surrounded by a crowd of enthusiastic followers and sympathizers, who spread their cloaks, strew leafy branches on the road, and shout, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" As one of our professors in graduate school said about forty years ago, this looks like a planned political demonstration. The meaning of the demonstration is clear, for it uses symbolism from the prophet Zechariah in the Jewish Bible. According to Zechariah, a king would be coming to Jerusalem (Zion) "humble, and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (9:9). In Mark, the reference to Zechariah is implicit, Matthew, when he treats Jesus's entry into Jerusalem, makes the connection explicit by quoting the passage: "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 (Matt. 21:5, quoting Zech. 9:9), The rest of the, Zechariah passage details what *kind* of king he will be: '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.' (9:10) This king, riding on a donkey, will banish war from the land-no more chariots, war-horses, or bows. Commanding peace to the nations, he will be a king of peace. Jesus's procession deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city. Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory, and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus's procession

embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God, ‘This contrast—between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar—is central not only to the gospel of Mark, but to the story of Jesus and early Christianity. The confrontation between these two kingdoms continues through the last week of Jesus’s life. As we all know, the week ends with Jesus’s execution by the powers who ruled his world. Holy Week is the story of this confrontation. But before we unfold Mark’s story of Jesus’s last week, we must first set the stage. For this, Jerusalem is central.

JERUSALEM

Jerusalem was not just any city. By the first century, it had been the center of the sacred geography of the Jewish people for a millenium. And ever since, it has been central to the sacred imagination of both Jews and Christians. Its associations are both positive and negative. It is the city of God and the faithless city, the city of hope and the city of oppression, the city of joy and the city of pain. Jerusalem became the capital of ancient Israel in the time of King David, around 1000 BCE. Under David and his son Solomon, Israel experienced the greatest period in its history. The country was united, all twelve tribes under one king; it was at its largest; it was powerful and thus its people were safe from marauding neighbors; a glorious temple was built by Solomon in Jerusalem. David’s reign in particular (and not Solomon’s) was seen not only as a time of power and glory, but also of justice and righteousness in the land. David was the just and righteous king, He became associated with goodness, power, protection/and justice; he was the ideal shepherd-king, the apple of God’s eye, even God’s son.”

Feedback-What works in this Bible Study? What does not work? Do you have suggestions for ways to improve the study or ideas for additional resources to include? If so email Onleilove Alston at oa2145@columbia.edu. The Poverty Initiative is currently working on a Bible Study/Devotional collection and your feedback will help us design it effectively.