#### 3/9/25 Sunday Message

#### What do we stand for? Entering the Spirit of Lent

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As I was preparing to speak during this season of Lent, I stumbled upon a post by lay minister Mark Allan Groleau. I’d like to share a couple of excerpts from that post.

“…one of the history's leading religious figures made it his mission to condemn the dividing lines of economic class, the exclusionary practices of the powerful, and the preferred treatment for the rich along with their comforts and predatory practices.

“…If you're a Christian, Christian-adjacent, or not at all, Lent is a time where observers can be challenged by the prophetic protest of Jesus' foray into the capital city.

“…Jesus had a community in mind who would do the hard work of loving neighbor and enemy alike - and act together towards everyone having plenty. It got him killed.”

When I read that, what struck me was how deeply Yeshua ben Yosef stood for what he believed in. And that might seem simple or obvious, but also, at almost the same moment, it occurred to me that every one of the cast of characters that these Passion scriptures focus their camera lens on, stood for something.

His disciples, the woman at the temple, the anointing woman, Judas… each of them stood for this vision that Yeshua shared with them - and they stood for it so deeply that it moved them to take action. Those actions were different for each of them, and for many, the action they took went counter to the beliefs of those around them.

Lent has devolved into a practice of “giving up something for Lent,” such as chocolate or swearing or video games for a period of 40 days, 40 days because Yeshua ben Yoseph’s 40 days in the desert is the template for our Lenten practice.

But for Jesus, his time in the desert wasn’t about giving up a bad habit for 40 days. Yeshua used his 40 days as preparation for his ministry. For him, it wasn’t about giving up gossiping or chocolate, he was doing a deep spiritual work. It wasn't just about fasting from food; it was about digging deep.

He was creating bedrock for his ministry, getting clear on what he stood for, looking for his potential weaknesses and choosing to rise above them.

It was about getting teeth in his faith, it was about getting clear on what he believed, on what he knew to be true, and releasing anything that would prevent him from expressing as his full God-Self. He cultivated a consciousness of clarity while he was in the desert and carried that forward with him.

And so, I think of Lent as a time for deep introspection, for cultivating an expanded consciousness that I can carry forward into the rest of my life. And this year I’d like to explore the Passion story through the lens of it asking each of us, what do we stand for?

But before we get started, I think it’s important that we lay some very important groundwork. First and foremost, Yeshua ben Yosef, the man we refer to as Jesus, was Jewish. In spite of the blond-haired blue-eyed Jesus that television and the movies want to show us, in spite of the plethora of paintings and artwork, Yeshua Ben Joseph was brown skinned with dark hair like his Jewish family, friends and neighbors.

Jesus was not Christian - Christianity didn’t exist while he was alive. The first time the word “Christian” is used in the Bible was in Acts which was written around 70 CE, about 37 after Jesus died. Christianity first emerged as a sect of Judaism practiced in the Roman province of Judea based first on the teachings of Jesus and later on the writings of Paul.

The first Christians were all Jewish people who established a Second Temple Jewish sect. Yeshua ben Yosef was a Jew, and every author in the Bible was Jewish by birth with the exception of one, and he was a convert to Judaism.

Bishop John Shelby Spong wrote the following, “…the Jewishness of Jesus, the Jewishness of Mary, his mother, the Jewishness of the Apostles, the Jewishness of Paul, and even the Jewishness of the heroes of the Hebrew past was at worst systematically denied and at best subtly understated.”

And we “…will never understand any of the Gospels… unless and until one can embrace their essential Jewishness.”

The story of the Holy Week, or the Passion of Jesus, starts with Yeshua entering the city of Jerusalem. The scripture from Matthew 21:1-11 is as follows:

“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 straight away. The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt…”

When I read this, I see disciples who had made the decision to stand for something so much that they were willing to go into village, find a donkey and colt, and bring them back to Yeshua.

Think of it this way - let’s say you follow a teacher in our modern day, and she or he says to you, “Go down to the HEB on the corner of Broadway and Basse Rd. In the parking lot near the bank, you’ll see a black Ford F150. It will be unlocked - key are in the visor. Go ahead and bring that truck to me and the little sports car next to it. And if anyone stops you, tell them it’s for your teacher.”

I don’t know about you, but I would be a little unsure about hopping into a stranger’s truck in an HEB parking lot and driving off. But his disciples believed so deeply in Yeshua, that they were willing to take a stand for what they believed in and retrieve the donkey with its colt.

The scripture continues, “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 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.”

Let’s paint the scene here. Jerusalem, the capital of Judea, is heaving with people. According to Josephus, a 1st century Roman-Jewish historian and contemporary of the Gospels' authors, on Passover, the population of Jerusalem swelled to more than two million as Jews made pilgrimages to the Temple for the annual celebration of Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt.

Ancient pilgrims had to be in the city no later than seven days before the beginning of the feast. There are lots of Jewish people. Lots of sheep. And lots of Roman soldiers because Judea was under Roman jurisdiction.

Three times a year, during the Jewish pilgrimage holidays, the governor, or “prefect” would ride and march to Jerusalem to manage the celebrating throng, for as the historian Josephus wrote it was during these holidays that people could be most easily provoked or stirred up to rebel against Roman oppression.

During the time of our story, Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea, and so it was he that rode into the city from the beautiful, wealthy harbor city of Caesarea, surrounded by his troops to keep order and to squelch any protests that might erupt.

And it was into this melee that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on his donkey, with a message of freedom, of autonomy, of love your neighbor, of change. He was highly visible with a large and noisy crowd around him who shouted “Hosanna,” while laying branches on the ground to pave the way.

It was just plain dangerous for Jesus to ride into the city with a crowd proclaiming him to be the son of David, drawing a parallel to an earlier conquering King: “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Matthew 21:9).

In doing, not only is Yeshua challenging Roman authority, but so are those who are with him. In doing so, he is also taking a powerful stand for his vision. And so is the crowd who walks with him for each one of them is knowingly challenging Roman authority and thus risking Roman capital punishment.

His true followers were willing to accept hardships and loss, humiliation and imprisonment, even death, in order to stand for Yeshua’s vision of a better world, a divine kingdom. They are also committed to what they stand for.

As I look at this story through this lens, I find myself asking what do I stand for? What do I believe in? And am I willing to stand up for what I believe?

The story of the Passion is one of risk taking. Our personal stories are also ones of risk. The risk that it takes emotionally, psychologically and sometimes physically, to step into our full spiritual potential, to do the work that it takes to get there, to do the right thing, the congruent thing, the thing with the highest integrity and authenticity.

For me, this story brings to mind people like Rosa Parks, who stood up for what she believed in. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Daryl Davis, Deeyah Khan, Rep John Lewis and so many others.

And you and me. We take risks in our lives as well for what we stand for. The risk we take when we choose to marry someone our parents don’t approve of. We are standing up for loving who we love.

The risk we take when we buck family tradition and choose work that makes our heart sing, that is meaningful, rather than what our family and teachers would have us do. We are standing up for our dreams for our life purpose even.

The risk we take when we leave the church of our upbringing because it no longer serves us. We our standing up for our faith and for that still small voice within.

These are all monumental.

And so, in my humble opinion, Lent is not about giving up chocolate or wine or swear words or gossiping or adding do-good things to our 40 day to-do list. Not that any of those things are not good things to do. I personally think not gossiping and eating healthier are very admirable things to do.

I believe that Lent is about a deep introspection. Lent is about taking the risk and going for deep change. Lent is about creating the opportunity for our own personal resurrection. Lent is about asking the hard questions and answering them. And for me this year, Lent is about asking myself what I stand for.

Are we taking the risk of being authentic and vulnerable? Are we standing in our truth and if not, why not? Are we looking at the world around us and asking what within me lets this be so? - both when we like what we see and when we don’t? ‘What do I stand for’ is one of the messages the passion story holds for us.

But if we do want to use Lent to give up something, then what might we consider giving up?

And I have to answer that I can’t answer that for you. But I can perhaps, point the way.

I believe the most important thing to let go is fear. The words, “Fear not” appear a lot in the Bible, some say over two hundred times, and with good reason. I feel that fear is at the root of most of what keeps us from shining our lights fully, from showing up as Love. Fear of being wrong. Fear of being hurt. Fear of looking foolish. Fear of being different. Fear of falling short. Fear of loss, of not being loved or lovable. Fear of not being good enough.

So, if we want to let go of something, let us consider giving up that which makes us feel and act small. That which stops us from being authentic or vulnerable. That which makes us look away. That which causes us to be arrogant. That which would cause us to betray who we are, or what we stand for, or betray a friend.

That which lets us turn a blind eye to injustice or tell a lie. That which allows us to let ourselves down, again and again. That which keeps us from keeping our word. That which limits our compassion. That which stops us welcoming the stranger or coming to the aid of someone who is being harassed.

That which stops us from having a healthy boundary. That which closes our ears and squeezes our hearts so that we don’t truly listen to one another. That which stops us from putting down an old story that no longer serves us.

That which would stop us from taking honest stock of who we are and what we stand for. That which stops us from being all that we can be.

That which stops us from following the charge of Yeshua ben Yosef: to know the Truth of ourselves and to live that Truth, to be in integrity, to love one another and to act like it, to be authentic, to hold ourselves to the highest standard. It is likely the same thing underlying all that stops us from shining our full and brightest light - fear - and that is the most important thing to let go.

For it is in releasing fear that we will come to know ourselves truly as children of God, as emanations of the Most High, as divine expressions of the One Life. We will come to know ourselves as Love.

And perhaps, rather than using this as a time with a beginning and a 40 day end, let us use Lent as a springboard so that we continue releasing that which limits us into the rest of the year making it a practice.

In this season of Lent, I invite you to ask the hard questions, hold up the mirror, deepen your walk with the God of your understanding, and get to know yourself a little better by walking the story of Yeshua’s Passion with him. Look deeply and thoughtfully within and ask yourself, what do I stand for?

And as you pave the way to pass through the narrow gate that Jesus told us leads to life, may you shed some of the fear that keeps you from living as boldly and bravely as you came here to live. May you shed the fear that keeps you from standing up for what you believe in.