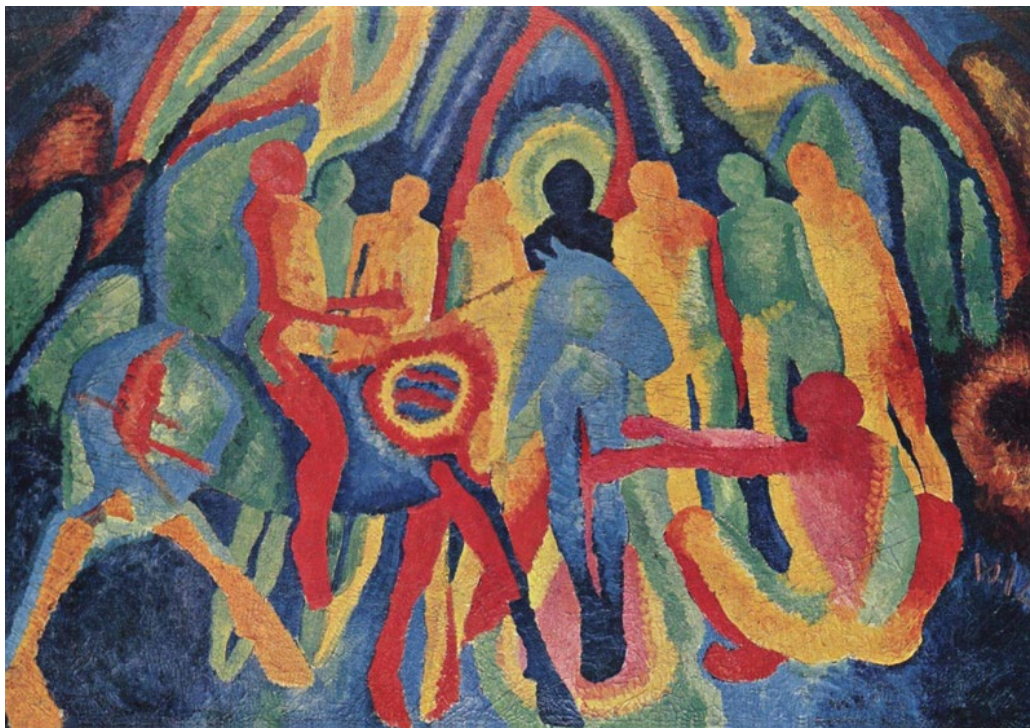


Path of Descent



Morgener, Wilhelm, *Entry of Christ into Jerusalem*, 1912, Museum am Ostwall, Dortmund, Germany
from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN

Luke 12:1-8

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Jesus began his journey on the Mount of Olives, in a pleasant garden and tranquil olive grove. The hill overlooks the old city of Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley to one of the largest gates to the city. As Jesus began his descent his disciples and followers laid their precious cloaks on the road for his donkey to step on, and cut palm branches from the trees and placed them on the road. As the donkey made its slow way down the hill and into the valley, the large crowd shouted, *'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!'*

From fragrant leaves and cool shade, Jesus rode down into the heat of the valley. From the safety and peace of the quiet garden, he traversed down into the chaos and violence of the ancient city. The gate he entered is now bricked up, and has been for centuries. It is called "The Messiah's Gate" because of the Jewish legend that this is the gate where the messiah will enter the city. We, as Christians, believe this is exactly where the messiah entered on a donkey. The large present-day church on the Mount of Olives is called "The Church of All Nations" and was designed with dusky stained glass, opaque lighting, and shadowed arches. This is to remind pilgrims that the Mount of Olives was a place of prayer, but also a place of temptation, sorrow, and betrayal. It was the beginning of Christ's passion, his descent toward the gloom and humiliation of the

cross. As much as his followers cried "Hosanna in the Highest," this was the start of the downward slope toward Jesus' death.

The spiritual writer, Richard Rohr, wrote a Lenten series called "*The Path of Descent*" in which he describes what he calls the "theme of themes." He writes that in the Bible "descent" is central; almost all stories describe a downward journey toward a grounding on God's presence, a letting go of self to discover God's transcendent reality. He writes: *"The Path of Descent is...the meta-narrative of the Bible. It is so obvious and so consistent and so constant that it's hidden in plain sight... Once Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire (around the year 313), and the clergy and the nobility banded together to protect the top. It became all about ascent, not descent. That suits the ego just fine; it much prefers winning to losing... But Christians call descent the Way of the Cross. The Desert Fathers and Mothers called it the Way of the Desert. In Philippians Paul called it kenosis, the way of self-emptying:*

"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:5-8).

Descent. Emptying. Surrender. Sounds kinda sad, right? It is certainly counter-cultural. Nowadays we're into dominance and power, winning in all things. Surrender is for the weak; compassion and empathy are for losers, being humble is stupid. Why would anyone be foolish enough to look weak?

I wish I could preach that it's the other way around; that it's all about becoming fantastic and well defended and famous and happy and wealthy all the time: rainbows and sunshine and balloons and unicorns. Nope. Sorry. That's the story we hear on commercials about pharmaceuticals, laundry detergent, and new cars. It's also a message we hear from the White House and in too many independent Christian churches who claim that wealth and power are blessings, as long as we give our money and obedience to our pastor or political leader. With blessing comes power and dominance.

The columnist David French wrote this recently in the NYT: *"Last month, Paula White, one of the President's most faithful and powerful evangelical supporters and a senior adviser to his new White House Faith Office, began offering "seven supernatural blessings" for the Easter season. If you "honor God" during the period of Passover and Easter, "God will assign an angel to you, he'll be an enemy to your enemies, he'll give you prosperity, he'll take sickness away from you, he will give you long life, he'll bring increase in inheritance, and he'll bring a special year of blessing." The suggested price for these extraordinary gifts is an offering to Paula White Ministries of \$1,000 or more,*

and if health, wealth and an angel weren't enough, White's ministry will also give you a gorgeous Waterford crystal cross."

The gospel message, on the other hand, is that we come closest to God when we experience painful realities, when we are at the edge of our resources, when we have to dig deeply into our innermost being, and into the mystery of God, to find grounding and hope. Jesus was closest to God as he fasted in the desert and hung dying on the cross. We grow closest to God when we face sorrow or tragedy; when we descend into the dark places within our own hearts. This is truly the mystery of the cross. This is how we discover the transcendent, the 'Ground of Being,' the root of all – letting go rather than riding high.

Jesus journeyed on Palm Sunday – not upward on a war-horse to a pinnacle of power and might like a Roman General; but down, down into the valley on a little donkey, down toward arrest, humiliation, torture and crucifixion. Jesus teaches the way of humility, compassion and gentleness, rather than domination. This is what he taught on his humble ride with palms down into the valley. It seemed joyous at first; a parade with shouts of Hosanna; but it was truly a path of sorrows, a way toward God's silence, self-giving, and mystery. The way to follow Christ is through simplicity – letting go – descent.

Richard Rohr relates it to our own lives, when he writes: *"Spiritually speaking, you will be, you must be, led to the edge of your own private resources. At that point, you will stumble over a necessary stumbling stone, as Isaiah calls it (Isaiah 8:14). You will and you must "lose" at something. This is the only way that Life-Fate-God-Grace-Mystery can get you to change, let go of your egocentric preoccupations, and go on the further and larger journey.... We must stumble and fall, I am sorry to say. We must be out of the driver's seat for a while, or we will never learn how to give up control to the Real Guide. It is the necessary pattern. Until we are led to the limits of our present game plan, and find it to be insufficient, we will not search out or find the real source, the deep well, or the constantly flowing stream.*

This is not about guilt or shame; it is about honesty and humility. By looking without flinching at our own 'haunted house' inside, then we can be clear and strong enough to seek the simplicity and beauty of God's presence within and around us. We descend into a place of hurt, to seek healing and wholeness, and give up illusions of grandeur.

St. Paul writes: *"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."* (2 Cor 12:9) *"For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."* (1 Cor 1:25) *"When I am weak, then I am strong."* (2 Corinthians 12:10) Descending into sorrow and surrender lead to grounding in what is real, and then to resurrection into a new strength, based on true strength, virtue and vision.

Rising up can lead to self-glorification; striving to replace God with one's own self. Like Icarus trying to fly to the sun with feathers covered in wax, we can rise higher than we should, creating the very real possibility of a tumbling fall and crash below. We become so wrapped up in our own fabulousness, that we think we can shut reality out behind the doors of our pride.

The Christian writer, Flannery O'Connor, tells a sad and stark story about this entitled "*Good Country People*." She introduces us to a rather self-righteous, conceited woman named Olga, who is disabled but full of herself. Olga is very proud of her intellectual achievements. She has earned her Ph.D.! That places her considerably above the "good country people," who surround her in her little southern town. Good people, but still country people. When a roguish Bible salesman comes through town, Olga is immediately attracted to him and he to her. They are two people who are in the know, who are a cut above the simple country folk around them, intellectually speaking. But one day, when Olga meets the salesman for a romp in the hayloft, he steals her wooden leg, leaving her helpless in the loft, exposed to the ridicule of others, fallen from her exalted perch. For the first time in her smug and prideful life, Olga sees herself for who she really is – a rather sad, helpless person who doesn't know as much as she thinks.

This sounds like a terribly sad and tragic story. But to Flannery O'Connor, this is actually hopeful. It means that Olga is finally able to see herself with clarity, to examine her egotism and her defenses. This opens up the possibility for change, for repentance, and for growth.

Richard Rohr writes: *"The Gospel is able to accept that life is tragic, but then graciously adds that we can survive and will even grow from this tragedy. This is the great turnaround! It all depends on whether we are willing to see down as up; or as Jung put it, that "where you stumble and fall, there you find pure gold." Lady Julian of Norwich said it even more poetically: "First there is the fall, and then we recover from the fall. Both are the mercy of God!"*" By descending, the doorway opens for renewal, we discover a rock foundation of honesty and grace.

Our church here in Glen Ridge has been on its own path of descent. We have experienced seasons of diminishment and sorrow. We have lost loved ones and seen friends move away. We are now in another time of transition and change. But wait, we have a new pastor, John Sampson, coming into ministry here in just a few weeks! A springtime of possibility and resurrection are at our door! This church has gone through a process of search and prayer, and is now ready for new life. Doorways are opening for renewal; the stone is rolling away.

On this Palm Sunday, we celebrate this path. We journey down like Jesus, from the Mount of Olives on his humble steed, toward the cross, toward sorrow. But then miraculously up into the joys of hope, wisdom, vision, and salvation. Thanks be to God. Amen.