
Victory of Descent

Luke 19:28-40

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel

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We often look down on being down. Words such as ‘downtrodden,’ ‘downhearted,’ ‘downgrade’ or ‘downfall,’ all have negative connotations for the most part. We try to avoid being down. Downsizing at a workplace could be a good thing for an organization, if it doesn’t mean that you’re the one who has to lose a job. Downgrading a hurricane is not necessarily bad, but usually we desire an upgrade, especially related to seating on an airplane; no one rejoices in being downgraded from a first-class seat to a, let’s just say, ‘cozier’ lower class seat. We don’t necessarily appreciate ‘down.’ We want to be up. People get excited about start-ups; no one is going to give financial capital toward start-downs.

And then there’s the government-- every now and then, it shuts down. At your job, you can get bogged down and not get to the projects you really want to work on. Sundown is a time when light disappears and we tend to cherish the sunrise when the light is up.

A ‘download’ could be good, if, and I mean a big if, technology is functioning correctly (I won’t tell you about this past week!). And then there’s the countdown as the ball drops in Times Square on New Year’s Eve; it can be exhilarating to count down into the new year. And ‘Countdown to Craziness’ at the start of the Duke Men’s basketball season is full of life and energy for students and the community, but when you don’t make the Final Four, it’s a letdown, especially when you feel, even if implicitly, as if you had religion/God on your side revealed in a player’s name—Zion Williamson. You would have thought that biblical name would have given us an advantage! And then this letdown during March Madness causes some people, perhaps some of you Duke Alumni, to have meltdowns.

Now, if we compare ‘downstairs’ to ‘upstairs,’ that is pretty neutral. But in the book of Acts, great spiritual events happen in an Upper Room as the disciples pray and notice it’s not called the Downer Room. No one likes a downer. No one wants to be down.

We like to move up in the world, socially and economically. The ‘StepUp’ organization in this region is about helping others to gain life skills and find a job to enable stability and social mobility, a movement upward. So often the societal and educational goal is to move up in our networks and net worth. If there is a so-called dysfunction and we are not up and haven’t reached the incline that we hope for and worked for all of our lives, and we find ourselves down, it can lead to embarrassment. We get down on ourselves, take pills, get therapy, sleep all day, do goat yoga, play golf, try salsa dancing, whatever it takes to get back up again because we think that’s the goal—up. To climb up the ladder of success.

American monk Thomas Merton, “pointed out that we may spend our whole life climbing the ladder of success, only to find when we get to the top that our ladder is leaning against the wrong wall” (Richard Rohr). In the church, we hear spiritual songs like “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder.” We’ve inherited this appetite for ascension in the church. Yearning to go up. “I’ll fly away, Oh glory, I’ll fly away” as if the goal is to go up, to escape the earth and material realities, to believe that somehow to become more spiritual means that we have to go higher, and the farther we are away from the earth and incarnate reality, we are closer to God and immortality. This view is nothing less than an inheritance of Neoplatonic thought because the Incarnation of God in Christ would tell us otherwise. Through the Incarnation, the Word became flesh and lived among us and doesn’t scramble away from human realities; the Word of God comes closer to humanity, closer to the earth, comes down, not up. To be more spiritual means one becomes more incarnational.

God’s goal for us is to come down, not up. The life of faith, the Christian life, is actually one of descent. The Gospel of Luke reveals this. Early on in Luke, Mary sings her heart out in the Magnificat and says, “[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly” (Luke 1). And at the baptism of Jesus, the Spirit descends, comes down, upon him in bodily form like a dove (Luke 3:22). And when Jesus calls the

disciples and gets into the boat, he tells Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” And then there are these men who carry a paralyzed man on a bed and were trying to bring him to Jesus and lay him before him to heal him, “but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowds in front of Jesus” (Lk 5:18-19). And even when Peter wants to make a dwelling on the mountain for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, the next day “they... come down from the mountain” (Luke 9:28-37). And then a Pharisee and tax collector “went up to the temple to pray.” The Pharisee prayed and thanked God that he wasn’t like other people, boasted about fasting twice a week and giving a good love offering, but the tax collector “would not even look up to heaven.” Instead, he beat his breast and asked God for mercy, so “this man went down to his home justified” (Luke 18). And then closer to today’s story, Jesus encounters a rich, tax collector named Zacchaeus. “When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.’ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him” (Luke 19:5-6). The Gospel of Luke is a literary downer!

But ‘down’ is exactly where you’ll find Jesus. Jesus was “going up to Jerusalem” yet “he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, [and] 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...” Jesus travels the path downward. There is no victorious palm waving in Luke but there’s a clear direction downward. This Gospel of Luke is basically a descent. The arc of discipleship is downward. The life of faith is not about linear progress nor a peak in triumphalism. It is not about going higher but deeper, downward, into the depths of God. Jesus takes the path down and is the way down, so when you follow him you have to travel the way of the cross, the path of descent. It may seem like a defeat or failure but you fail forward into faithfulness as you keep walking. Christ’s descent is an act of faithfulness and act of God. Down is where God is and what God does and what God wants. Even at the vision of the end time—the seer John put it this way, “I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God....And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals...” (Rev 21).

The pattern of faith is a descent and this descent is an ascent. As my colleague Bruce Puckett told me recently, “The ascent is death.” Even today, we sing, “Lift high the cross.” The path down is a path up. Jesus doesn’t rise with the socially mobile college admission scheming elites of his day; rather, he descends toward, he moves toward, he’s compelled by criminals, those deemed, to use the words of Franz Fanon, “the wretched of the earth.” This spiritual victory of God is a downward spiral. Deeper spirituality descends into the depths of despair but it is there on the descent, on the path down, that you find God for Jesus is the way of descent. His royal ascension is by descension. He reigns by decline. He loses everything, and we gain everything. “Blessed is the king who comes (down) in the name of the Lord...”

I often wonder if those who suffer from depression in some way, know something more about the heart of God because they’re in tune with suffering and know what it means to descend. The path down for Jesus toward Jerusalem is a call to get off of our high horses and on to humble colts. It is a call to get closer to the ground, to the earth, to get in touch with where we’ve come from—to remember we are dust and to dust we shall return. This descent keeps our feet grounded on the earth and reminds us that we are humans, in Latin, *humus*, ‘from the earth.’ This is why the people kept spreading their cloaks on the road as Jesus took the path down. Jesus wants to keep them grounded in touch with all of the material world— dirt and soil and stones and plants and air. Close to olives and colts and cows and crows and all of God’s creation, bread and wine, the concrete physical elements of life, not escaping from the earth, upward, but touching the earth, downward, just as the future resurrection will do. Cloaks on the road. Feet on the ground, on the path down to Calvary.

Perhaps this descent might even be a path to decency, that is, to remember that we all, as humans, have the same end, and need to meet each other as dust on this human road to the cross. In a society where basic human decency and dignity are at risk, this descent, the downward path of God, this form of dying, could help us in our living.

When Carl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist was an old man, one of his students read John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and he asked Jung, “What has your pilgrimage really been?” Jung answered: “In my case, *Pilgrim’s Progress* consisted in my having to climb down a thousand ladders until I could reach out my hand to the little clod of earth that I am.” To descend is to meet your humanity in the human Jesus. To descend is to get back in touch with who

you really are. By descending down the way of God in Christ, your true self will ascend or emerge, therefore, you descend in order to become your true self, to find your real self, your human self. Often, we may think to follow Jesus, to be in the Church, we have to be less human, but the path down reveals that we are called to become more fully human and the more fully human we are, the closer to God we become. Holy Week is holy because it's so human. To be holy is to be human like Jesus on the path down. Christ sanctifies our humanity this week through his descent. We aren't to escape our humanness, but embrace it and in that, we embrace Jesus who became one of us.

As Jesus descends, we see what might be called a triumphant moment. Yet the triumph is in the form of tears. As Jesus nears the city, he weeps over Jerusalem. He's so human and humble as he rides an earthly colt. The path down is a victory because you don't have to be under the illusion any longer that you are not dust. You can recognize that to ascend is to die, as you get more in touch with Jesus, more in touch with your humanity, more in touch with the earth. Like Zacchaeus, when you come down, that's where you'll find Jesus. Descents are not only for Lent; they are for your whole life before God.

Not up, but down. That's the direction Jesus goes and it's the direction where faith deepens. It is the path where freedom is found because when you go down, you have nothing to lose and everything to gain. When you go down, you let go of inhibitions and you are free, freed to die. Willing to descend. You risk everything to gain your life!

And, what's so interesting is that when Jesus takes the path down from the Mount of Olives, then the "whole multitude of disciples began to praise God joyfully." On the path of descent is when real praise begins to happen. We are going down which is why we praise God together on this Palm Sunday. We may often think that the praise goes up when we experience a high and ascend up a ladder. But praise occurs on the descent because Jesus lives into his vocation and the will of God. Praise occurs on the descent because Jesus embraces his full humanity on that journey and let go of everything holding him back from becoming all God desires. Praise occurs on the descent because there are no more pretensions on the path down as one's life is laid bare, stripped of all facades while recognizing that we are truly dust. Praise occurs in this direction because the path down is a victorious descent—to become more fully human like Jesus, to embrace our humanity, to fulfill the will of God, and to stop striving and let go of our life to receive life.

Downward is where Jesus is. Downward is where the praise is. We'll remain bound if we only seek to rise and ascend, but we will be freed, like the colt, when we no longer fear the descent. Don't look down on being down because King Jesus is taking the mortal path down for the life of the world. Let's boogie on down this way, his way, and know that there's nothing wrong with being down in the Christian life, and especially as a preacher, it's always good to know when it's time to sit down.