

Palm Sunday/April 14, 2019

Luke 19:29-40; Psalm 118;

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"This Odd Day"

A happy and blessed Palm Sunday to you all.

It is the tradition in this church and in many across the nation and around the world, that on this day, we celebrate Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. We sing hymns of "Hosanna!" and have the children parade around the sanctuary waving palm branches. In some places there are parades, with bands and drums playing, people wave the palm branches, in Poland and Paraguay they carry a statue of Jesus on a donkey through town, and some places end the Palm Sunday liturgy carrying a cross or a crucifix out of the church.

It is a very special day, marking the beginning of Holy Week. Palm Sunday begins the story of Jesus' last week of earthly life. It is a day of contrasts, a story that begins in an odd way and in fact is filled with oddness throughout. It is a day we have children waving palms, leading us in a joyous time of celebration, all the while the rest of us know very well what will soon be occurring - a shoddy, rigged trial, imprisonment, torture and a cruel and inhumane death. It is a story that forces us to be in two places, emotionally, intellectually and perhaps even spiritually, at the same time. This day tests our sanity and forces us to examine the sanity of the world in which we live. For who would be celebrating, knowing that things are falling apart?

We begin with Jesus leaving Jericho and going to Jerusalem by way of Bethany and Bethpage, at the Mount of Olives. This is a place that has eschatological or end times symbolism and would have planted images of prophetic vision and import into the minds of Jesus followers.

We can only imagine the state of mind of Jesus and his disciples. They have been heading toward Jerusalem for months now, perhaps even years. Jesus had *set his face* toward the city, had committed himself to going there, where he had openly told his disciples, that it is the place that he, the *Son of Humanity*, will be delivered to the Gentiles, mocked and shamefully treated, scourged and killed. And on the third day be raised (Lk. 18:32-33). And there they were, at the gates of that destination. No turning back now.

We can imagine their nervousness and anxiety upon entering Jerusalem. One commentator even suggests that Palm Sunday *"begins like an espionage novel."* (Rev. Ron Adams, Christian Century, March 27, 2109, p. 18) *"There's the suggestion of secrecy and premeditation. Arrangements are made and plans formulated, and in the end the transfer goes off without a hitch.* He is talking about Jesus' instructions to two of his disciples to acquire a donkey for him to ride on. The mission is given, the code words: *"The Lord has need of it."* are passed on. There are agents waiting to do their part, just as surely as there are enemy spies in the shadows. It has all been prearranged. These events that are about to occur are no accident. They have been planned, and the moment of implementation has come.

In our traditional reading of this story, we may fail to understand the great importance and real danger that those present there would have known. This is without question a highly political act. Jesus is putting himself out there as a possible competitor, a threat, to the powers that be. This entrance is the culmination of all he has been saying and doing, his healings of the sick, his raising of the dead, his lifting up of the poor and marginalized, his empowering of the disempowered. Luke notes that some of the Pharisees present in the crowd, tell Jesus to silence his followers. Perhaps they recognize the

developing danger, the rising tide of emotion and anti-Empirical energy that could lead Pilate and Rome to bring an iron fist down upon such a demonstration. And Jesus' reply "*that if these were silenced, even the stones would cry out*" betrays his feelings that it is no longer under his control, that the things now happening have a mind of their own, as if to say, only God is in control now, and we can do nothing to stop it.

Yet, who really knows what is going on? Luke tells us that it is only the disciples of Jesus who lay down their cloaks, their coats before him - and note, Luke does not include anything about palms, as the other gospel writers do. This could be called "*Coat Sunday*." The laying of cloaks and garments symbolize the honor and respect given to a great leader. But while Luke says it is only his disciples, he also tells us it is a "*multitude*" of people, suggesting a large crowd escorting Jesus into the city. And remember, this is during the festival of Passover, when thousands of Jewish pilgrims would be coming to Jerusalem. These actions of Jesus' entourage would certainly be seen as subversive and rebellious!

Luke tells us they shout out, quoting Psalm 118 and the prophet Zecharia (9:9), saying "*Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in Heaven and glory in the highest heaven! No Hosannas!*" in Luke, no cries of "*Save us!*" but rather a reference to the prophet's description of a coming leader who will free Israel from her enemies and destroy the powers of war, the Prince of Peace.

Yet their cry for a King seems odd and unfitting for one who withstood *temptation by the devil* who offered him authority and *kingship* over all the kingdoms of the world (Lk. 4:5-8), and who in John's gospel, withdrew from a mob intent on making him *king* (Jn. 6:15), and where in his last discourse with his disciples, he said, "*no longer do I call you servants. . . but I have called you friends*" (Jn. 15:15). A clear instruction to live in an *egalitarian* versus a *hierarchical* way of being. It seems the disciples were still not listening, not comprehending what Jesus had been telling them all along.

The disciples hailed him as a new King, "*who comes in the name of the Lord!*" Did they not yet understand what *they* were being *called to*? To a kingdom *not of this world*? They had argued about who among them was the greatest, and they would do so again, even after they shared the Last Supper with Jesus. Could they not see what he was showing them?

Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, in humility, as one bringing peace, and the way of peace through non-violent action and love. He came not to sacrifice himself but to show that the way to peace, is through love of God and of one's neighbor and in compassionate giving of oneself for others. Are we still trying to make him King, refusing to give way to *his way* of non-violence? We talk about the dangers of war, of hatred and violence. What if we took seriously Jesus' example and began to *risk* non-violence? Perhaps the most courageous and faithful position of all? The way of Christ Jesus.

Palm Sunday is an odd day. It is a day with ups and downs, with emotional highs and lows, with danger and anticipation, with joy and sorrow and uncertainty. It is a day that we are to pay attention and prepare for the coming week - Holy Week. It is a day we are to ask ourselves if *we* have been listening and attending to the voice of Jesus?

In a time when we are in such need of peace - peace of mind; peace from war; peace from the violence in our streets; peace from the ongoing destruction of our planet; peace from division and disunity; peace from deceit and deception; peace for our hearts and for our world. We need in this coming week, to gather together, as Jesus did with his disciples, and listen. Listen once again to his words, to his teaching, that we might learn *the way to peace*. Amen.