

“Holy Parade”

Luke 19:28-39 (41-48)

From the Pulpit of First Presbyterian Church
Champaign, Illinois
Palm Sunday 2022
April 10th

Matt Matthews

Jesus' long journey is over.

He and his disciples—*we*—are at the edge of the city. They've placed him on a colt. They've littered the road with their coats so the hooves of that colt don't even touch the ground. (In other gospel accounts, they wave palm branches, hence *Palm Sunday*. In other gospel accounts, they shout “Hosanna,” which means “save” or “hail”) They hail Jesus as the blessed king. He has arrived. And we have arrived with him. We are taking our final steps into Jerusalem.

Imagine that day. What are you thinking? What does this mean? What's going to happen next?

Do you remember from way back in Chapter 9 of Luke's gospel, we read about his transfiguration? Jesus took Peter, James, and John up on a mountain. While Jesus was praying, the light changed. He clothes became white, as white as a flash of lightening. Peter, James, and John were bewildered, even more so when Moses and Elijah show up in a cloud surrounding Jesus. *Do you remember that fantastical tale?* These Old Testament all-stars spoke about, and I quote, “Jesus' departure which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.”

Ever since that day these disciples were put on notice that they were heading for Jerusalem. But with the clear destination in mind, the purpose of that visit was less clear. Jesus was to make his departure—his *exodus*—from Jerusalem? This, certainly, perplexed Jesus' friends.

Little then did Peter, James, and John know that Jesus would enter as a king. And here at the edge this great city, little did these disciples know that Jesus would depart from this city by way of crucifixion, through the shadows of death in a borrowed grave.

How could this happy day turn into that? Today the air is filled with “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” The crowds (we!) are filled with hope, and today is a high, happy day. How could joy turn to fear? How could this happy throng turn into a mob?

Sure, Jesus has intimated this sort of conclusion. But why would we believe that? *How* could we believe that? Today—today is a parade into the city we've been walking towards for a long, long time. Jerusalem, O Jerusalem. Men and women are shouting; they are happily, expectantly shouting, “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.”

At the birth of Jesus that crowd of angels said a similar thing. *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,*
“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors! (Luke 2:13-14)

Peace in heaven. Peace on Earth. It's a parade. There's much joy. We are so relieved, finally, to be here.

As the city rises up before him, Jesus looks up and around Jerusalem, Luke tells us that Jesus does a strange thing. He weeps over it. In the middle of this triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus weeps over it.

"If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes."^[1]

Peace in Heaven. Peace on Earth. But for Jesus, there seems to be no peace in these fraught moments. We have thought this was a happy parade. Now Jesus is weeping? *If you had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace.*

Imagine how confused those disciples may have been in this supposedly happy celebration. And we may feel some confusion, too.

It is a day of contrasts.

It is a happy day, where darkness looms. There is a parade, and then Jesus storms the temple and turns over the tables of the money changers. It is a day of new beginnings, but we know Friday will be a day of stark endings. This day of fulfillment will so soon turn sour. From Jerusalem's western, main gate Pilate will come into the city in a chariot or on a steed.^[2] From the eastern gate, Jesus rides on a puny colt. Pilate's army carries spears; they wear armor. Jesus' crowd of commoners wear no regal finery; they carry no spears (just palms?!), no trumpets, just happy shouts. Pilate is one kind of king. Jesus is another. A day of contrasts, indeed.

Truth be told, we probably understand Pilate better than Jesus. Pilate comes to keep an order we understand. Jesus comes to turn our traditions upside down. Pilate stands in the tradition of Rome, and he speaks a language that makes one kind of sense: taxes, armies, public works, laws, empire. Jesus stands in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, and he speaks a language of repentance, of love, of dismantling the weaponry of war, of sacrifice.

William G. Carter describes the scene this way:

Jesus rides no high horse, just a lowly colt. He chooses to enter a deadly situation without force or protection. He gives himself freely and without reservation. This is a prophetic act, a sign of God's vulnerable love, which risks everything . . .^[3]

Humility? Self-giving? Vulnerable love? Risk? Holy friendship? Being a servant to others? The master washing the servants' feet? We might love Jesus more. But, I suspect, we understand Pilate better.

* * *

Some Pharisees urge Jesus to keep his people quiet. Are they worried that he is bringing unwanted attention to the Jews? Are they worried Roman authorities will retaliate by rolling some heads? Are they simply embarrassed? Are they warning Jesus for his own good? (*Hey, behavior like this can get somebody crucified!*)

It doesn't matter to Jesus. He's looking beyond them as the city looms.

Jesus simply tells them that if his people were quiet, the very stones would shout out. God's good news is going to get out no matter what. God can use anything to share Good News: shouting disciples and children, late-night arrests, hastily convened trials, rigged mobs. God can raise up even stones to speak out.

I am reminded of accounts of the funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr., which happened 54-years ago this weekend. Tens of thousands of people made their way to Atlanta to pay their respects to the civil rights leader.

Hotels were soon booked to capacity; many mourners were given lodging in churches, colleges, and private homes.

Georgia governor Lester Maddox barricaded himself inside the State Capitol, surrounded by armed guards in riot gear; he ordered them to shoot anyone who tried to get in the building. Maddox initially refused to fly the state flag at half-staff, but later complied. Although over a hundred other American cities experienced riots, Atlanta was peaceful.

After the private funeral, King's casket was loaded onto a rugged farm wagon that was drawn by two mules. One hundred and fifty thousand mourners followed the procession down the four-mile route to Morehouse College, King's alma mater, for a public funeral. Thousands more lined the parade route's side streets. At Morehouse former college president Benjamin Mays said, "Martin Luther faced the dogs, the police, jail, heavy criticism, and finally death; and he never carried a gun, not even a knife to defend himself. He had only his faith in a just God to rely on." (The Writer's Almanac, April 8, 2022).

I suspect this is how Jesus had the courage to ride that colt into Jerusalem. People lined the way, cheering. He wept over the city that would hear nothing of God's peace. *And he was encouraged only by the grace of a just God.*

* * *

There is more going on here in this scene than meets the eye. The disciples—we—can hardly take it in. The crowds are happy; Jesus weeps. The Pharisees are nervous. Something big is going down, but we aren't sure what; we can't quite see around the corner. Today completes the journey we've been making all these days and weeks; our long journey is finally over. Once in the city, Jesus we go immediately to the temple, to his Father's house. Some of us will remember the stories we've heard of Jesus when he was 12-years-old and had been accidentally left behind when his family returned to Nazareth after having made a Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem. When they returned to Jerusalem, they found Jesus at the temple, listening to and asking questions of the elders. His mother was frantic. "Why did you have to look for me?" Jesus asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my father's house?"

And now he's here again, at home in his father's house.

This is a happy, swirling parade day. A day of contrasts. A day rippling with all kinds of tension. There's both victory and danger in the air.

Regardless of what's happening, regardless of what this may or may not mean, regardless of what's coming next, this fact remains, and it's worth celebrating. We've been making our way to Jerusalem—the city where heaven and earth kiss, a thin place, the navel of the world. We recognize this day of God's holy visitation. For a long, long, long time we've been on the road. Jesus has led the way. He has healed, and taught, and prayed, and laughed along the way. We have gladly, earnestly followed.

Now we are here.

Jerusalem.

With Jesus.

“Blessed is the king
who comes in the name
of the Lord!
AMEN.

* * *

^[1] 43 Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. 44 They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.”

^[2] See Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan (*The Last Week*, New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006)

^[3] *and promises to gain all. This is the means by which God creates peace.* William G. Carter, *Feasting on the Word/Year C Vol 2*, p 156.