

Homily for Palm Sunday 4-14-19
Gospel -- Luke 19:28-40
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We began our worship this morning with a special procession, with palms and hosannas, remembering the day our Lord entered the holy city of Jerusalem, beginning the last week of his earthly life. But Jesus wasn't the only one coming into Jerusalem that day two thousand years ago, and his entrance was so much more than a happy parade. The Passover festival was a few short days away, and huge crowds of pilgrims were descending upon the city, preparing for the most important religious observance of the year. In the coming days, Jews from all over the ancient Near East would come to the Temple to purchase and sacrifice a lamb, then prepare and eat the highly symbolic Passover meal, beginning the weeklong Feast of Unleavened Bread.

For the folks celebrating the Passover back then, and for our Jewish neighbors who celebrate Passover today, it is a singularly powerful, moving, dynamic feast of remembrance. Passover is the retelling and celebration of God's liberating and restoring power. When God's people were enslaved, crushed under the weight of Egyptian malice and cruelty, God raised up Moses, a mighty prophet of deliverance who would lead his people out of bondage and into the long-awaited Promised Land. Freedom, liberation, restoration, and fulfillment of God's holy promises: these are the essence of Passover.

So on Palm Sunday, Jesus is entering Jerusalem, along with scores of others (although most of them are probably on foot, not riding donkeys). The old city isn't that big -- about a mile north-to-south, and half a mile west-to-east. Jerusalem will be quite crowded in the coming days; the best estimates are that the city's usual population of about 40,000 swelled to over 200,000 during Passover.¹

The Roman occupying presence in Jerusalem will be heightened as well. The Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, spends most of his time at his headquarters in Caesarea (which is about two days' march away). But over the years, the Emperor and his lackeys have come to understand the "potentially subversive nature" of the Passover celebration.ⁱⁱ After all, hordes of people filled with religious fervor and celebrating their ancestors' liberation from oppression might be tempted to turn that fervor against their current occupiers, might they not? Especially with a dynamic, prophetic, rabbleroising voice to inspire them...

So Pontius Pilate and his troops are marching into Jerusalem from the west, riding high on majestic war-horses and armed with weapons and imperial banners, drunk on power and intimidation; while at the same time a humble miracle-worker from Nazareth enters from the east, riding on a little donkey, with a ragtag bunch of followers who throw down their cloaks on the steep and dusty road in a gesture of honor and praise.

Those cloaks on the road -- different colors, faded, many of them ragged, patched up here and there -- those cloaks may not look like much. Discarded pieces of dirty cloth, cast aside unthinkingly? But those cloaks make a controversial statement. Those cloaks are the physical manifestation of the faith of the gathered crowds. You throw cloaks down before royalty; not teachers, or merchants, or soldiers, or doctors, or priests. You throw cloaks down before your King.

And what are the crowds saying? What are the words they cry out at the top of their lungs, tears of joy and gratitude streaming down their cheeks?

*"Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!"ⁱⁱⁱ*

This is the King. He's the One. This humble prophet from Nazareth has walked on water, calmed storms, healed the lepers, restored sight to the blind... He's given wholeness and dignity and love to those whose spirits have been abused and denied for so long. He's lifted up the meek and lowly, he's brought down the proud, he's declared the year of God's favor. He's raised the dead to life. And he's done none of this for himself, for his own glory or fame or status. He's not drunk on power, or obsessed with self-preservation. He is humble, and gentle, and kind. He gives all the glory to the One who sent him.

Blessed is **THE KING** who comes **IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!**

Jesus enters Jerusalem not in a military procession, not like the conquering warrior whose power resides in violence and intimidation and fear, but as a humble teacher and healer and prophet, riding a donkey, whose authority comes not from his physical strength or his wealth or his ability to crush anyone who might oppose him. His authority, his kingship, comes from who he is and the message he brings. This Jesus, this King of kings, is a prophet of peace and love and mercy, liberation and restoration. He comes not for the Empire, or for any ruler or high council or military force or economic system. He comes for God, and he comes for peace. And because he comes for God and for peace, he presents a challenge to the forces of fear and oppression and 'might makes right.'

The same challenge rings true for us today. If we claim Jesus as our King, we cannot worship any others -- people, nations, or philosophies. Jesus is the only one who deserves our absolute devotion and worship and praise. We bow down to him alone.

Peace in heaven, and glory in the **highest heaven!**

The Pharisees in the crowd that day, observing this holy parade, recognize that Jesus is entering dangerous territory (both literally and figuratively). Pilate will not be pleased when he hears about this prophet whose followers declare him to be the holy, long-awaited, saving King of Peace. So these

sympathetic Pharisees urge Jesus to calm the crowds, to keep the people quiet. They're all calling attention to themselves, and especially to Jesus, and it's not safe. But this is a turning point, a moment of truth, the beginning of the end. The time has arrived for all the promises and prophecies to be fulfilled, come what may. And so Jesus responds, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."^{iv}

There's no keeping quiet, and no turning back now. The earth-shattering work of Holy Week has begun. Thanks be to God! **Amen.**

ⁱ from Borg & Crossan's *The Last Week*

ⁱⁱ Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 2004) page 242.

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 19:38 NRSV

^{iv} 19:40