

The Waving, Cheering Crowd  
Luke 19:28-40  
Palm + Passion Sunday  
April 14, 2019  
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This morning we step onto the bridge of Holy Week that carries us from Lent into Easter. Culturally and socially, this is our initiation into Spring. Even if temps have already swelled into the mid-80s in recent days, and crawfish boils abound, it is the next week that officially welcomes linen and seersucker and little girls in white shoes. It feels good to have the palm branches waving and the music of worship returning to a more celebratory pace. What does the invitation of this week offer you? Perhaps we give ourselves to a little sacred imagination in reading today's text and assure ourselves we would have been in the crowd yelling "Hosanna" for Jesus—we would have been ones who understood Jesus' mission—we would have gotten it as he processed into Jerusalem. Or maybe, like me, you feel the pull of Spring and planting a summer garden and find yourself distracted by the pull of the ordinary with not quite enough patience for the extraordinary. If so, you know all too well how prone we really are to wander away from the palms and the passion.

In these last breaths of the Lenten season, we run the risk of letting go of the biblical story not just out of distraction but out of pure excitement for the cultural one. Enough with the introspection and self-denial or practices that draw us to our best. Let's relax all of that and just live our lives already. Ah, but let's resist the false dichotomy of that pull just a bit longer. Let's give ourselves to this story for the week. Let's hear the invitation to whole, integrated, purposeful lives. Let's hold on just a little while longer.

We return to Luke this morning, where we have been anchored since Advent. And each time we've reached into Luke's gospel, we have recalled the very particular time and place in which Jesus is born and living and preaching. Luke wants us to remember that Jesus was born when Quirinius is still Governor. Luke reminds us that Jesus is baptized in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. And now, in this very particular time and

place, when exploitation of the poor was ordinary and casting aside anyone who didn't fit social norms was widely accepted, Jesus has dined with tax collectors, welcomed women into his ministry, extended real grace to sex workers, named folks outside of his religious tradition as being on the path of God, and relaxed interpretations about purity codes in favor of loving bigger and better in God's name. And in this very particular time and place, in that very specific cultural and political climate, Jesus enters Jerusalem on a colt.

When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Who is this crowd? Just the 12? A sizably expanded circle of followers who have given themselves to the Jesus Way? This is a crowd who is not just drawn to him as a charismatic teacher, but drawn to him as The Path to a new way of being in the world. In the face of a religious tradition that was becoming exclusivist and elitist, he offered a table where all were welcome. When the social culture separated those who were acceptable from those who were not, Jesus gathered them all together and reconciled them to one another. And in today's text, we encounter a scene in which Jesus offers a different path than the political and dominant forces of Rome. Surely the crowd is broadly diverse and desperate to believe in the change he is modeling for them. In fact, it feels to me something like a public rally.

Last week's story with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus was deeply personal and intimate –the Jesus who knows us and loves us and calls us by name. We are happiest with these personal scenes, with the ways of loving and blessing, with the coziness of a meal and sacred space. And yet, there is more to the story just as there is more to following Jesus. Luke's gospel text today reminds us the Jesus who calls us to love also shows us we have to do something with that love. We have to embody that love for one another, we have to embody that love for the sake of the world. This is a love is deeply personal and ALSO an active love that enters the political realm.

Remember with me as Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan<sup>1</sup> imagine the symbolism of this scene:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://onemansweb.org/theology/the-year-of-mark-2015/jesus-rain-on-my-parade-palm-sunday.html>

“Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year... One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class... On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus's procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire... Pilate's military procession was a demonstration of both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology.”

There's something happening here in Jesus' actions. His choices are specific. The crowd's reaction is specific. This is not just about momentary praise for a popular rabbi. There is a theological and political statement wrapped in the symbols of this procession. The love of God is for all people. Hear that: The love of God is for all people. The love of God is not just a warm emotion to keep us cozy at night. The love of God is not a private possession to assure us of eternal paradise. The love of God demands that we act justly and with compassion. And sometimes the love of God draws us into the capital to stare down powers that lack compassion, and a call to justice, and are not motivated by a heartbeat of love. Because that may be what it takes to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

We're holding this story in sacred scripture of the expansive, gracious, celebratory love of God. It is personal and intimate. This story changes the way we understand ourselves and opens up opportunities for us to love each other. The Way of Jesus is deeply personal and fosters strong community because we begin to realize how we are connected to each other by the love of God.

We're also holding this notion that what we believe about God absolutely must inform how we live in the world. The impact is collective. This is not just private, this is public. The things we believe about Jesus, when they are lived out, call us to organize ourselves in distinct ways for the common good.

Hidden to us modern readers in the gospel story this morning is a man riding into town with the power of Rome behind him. Imagine this man riding in on one side of town with the crowds that gather to cheer for that certain kind of abusive power. While this man rides in with great influence and power, Jesus grabs a colt and starts his own procession. Yes, Jesus is riding toward certain death. And he is also showing everyone who is watching that the way of God is a different way than the way of Rome. The way of love is radically threatening to the way of fear-mongering and ego-driven power.

When the theological must become political, it is good news, gospel, because we are talking about God's plan for the comprehensive thriving of all. We're talking about how we Jesus followers must organize ourselves in love for the common good. We're considering how the faith we profess in here will and must propel us to shape the world we are making out there. As the crowds should, "Hosanna," we hear our call to be people who embody the radical, subversive love of God as fully revealed in Jesus the Christ.

North Carolina Pastor Ricky Woods' commentary on the challenge of Palm Sunday invites us even deeper into the story of this Jesus-led procession. He writes:

"What is often overlooked in this text is how palm branches serve as a symbol of resistance to foreign rule. [Citing] an article by John Hart entitled 'Judaea and Rome the Official Commentary,' he states, 'From time of the Maccabees, palms or palm branches had been a national symbol. Palm branches figured in the procession which celebrated the rededication of the temple in 164 BC and again when the winning of full political independence was celebrated under Simon in 141BC. Later, palms appeared as a national symbol on the coins struck by the Judean insurgents during the first and second revolt against Rome.'

For Jesus to enter Jerusalem amidst shouts of affirmation and waving palm branches could be seen as an act of defiance against Roman rule. What removes the hint of defiance is that Jesus rides in on a donkey and not a warrior's horse. This shows that God's plan of deliverance would not come by fear and violence but would come through humility and love. It is hope, humility and love operating in an environment of danger that shows us what God can accomplish and how.

The church is sometimes called upon to engage in [bold, brave, and even] dangerous activity, whether it is speaking out on issues of injustice or providing theological clarity about the church's purpose in a culture that craves entertainment. Palm Sunday," writes Pastor Woods, "is more than another day of celebration by the Christian Church as it awaits Easter. It is also a day of reflection on how the presence of believers in dangerous places can transform them into places of hope. Palm Sunday is God's reminder to us of what can be done when courage, humility, love and hope coalesce and enter places of danger and what can happen when those filled with these character traits engage in [bold, brave, and even] dangerous activity--this all leads to salvation."

What did they mean when they waved those branches? What hope did the crowd see in Jesus? What might Palm Sunday mean for us if those first branches were waved not in saccharine sweet praise but as a bold, subversive statement of where God was and was not and who God was and was not and who spoke for God and who did not? What might it mean if the palms they waved signified belief in a world we cannot see yet commit ourselves to making right here on earth as it is in heaven? What if the leaves they waved in the air were brushing away the dark powers of this world that scapegoat, promise-make, fear-monger and deceive? What if the crowd wasn't confused at all about who Jesus was or what he was setting out to do? What if they were crystal clear in their minds and were lining up to give their lives to his way?

It is now the 18th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar and Pontius Pilate is still governor of Judea. Jesus and his followers hold their palm branches high as if to say, "No more. This ends." The kingdom of God is not found in the kingdoms of this world. The kingdom of God must be borne, created, welcomed, invited into being through our lives. The kingdom of God is the kingdom of love, and Caesar and everyone lined up behind him are right to be terrified of just how thoroughly the love of God can transform the world. Friends, these are the branches we have pinned to our chests this morning. These are the branches we have laid down beneath our worship. These are the branches that pave the way before us this week. Which procession will you join today? Which path will you walk? Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

Portions borrowed from "A Welcoming Parade" by Rev. Lott, March 20, 2016