

It Starts With a Parade

Luke 19:28-40

April 10, 2022 Palm Sunday

Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael

After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.

As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, 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, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Palm Sunday. You may have memories of this annual church celebration and drama. Or you may not. This may be new to you. Every church and worship committee and pastor imagines different ways to bring the story to life and add some drama. How to invite people to participate in the retelling of the biblical story. Visiting one of our members this week. She said, "I remember the year we had a live donkey." I said, "In the sanctuary?!" "No, in Canoles Hall. The donkey kept slipping on the floor." I admire the commitment to realism in storytelling!

I remember the year I was an intern at the Presbyterian Church in Noe Valley in San Francisco, Noe Valley Ministry. My supervising pastor said to me, "It is the intern's job to pick up the palm branches for Palm Sunday. The city landscaping dept. trims all palm trees the week before so churches can pick them up." Great. He did not mention they were usually in the medians. And he did not mention these palm branches were 6 feet long. I had a little Buick Opal. But I was determined to be ready to help our congregation participate in the story and welcome Jesus on Sunday so I opened the back windows of my car and laid the palm branches across and flew up and down the hills of the city.

Every church finds old and new ways to tell the story. Our palm branches today come from Eco-Palms. The Presbyterian Hunger Program partners with growers in Guatemala and other countries to sustainably harvest the palms, offering fair wages for those who harvest, use the

money to provide food for their underserved community and provide beautiful branches for us to use. We are participating in a life-giving way.

How does Luke tell the story? Luke jumps into the action of this story. Luke moves the action directly to the arrival of Jesus at the Mount of Olives and his requisitioning of a colt.

There can be no doubt that Jesus is casting his dramatic actions with direct reference to the prophet Zechariah who was one of those killed in the temple.

“Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Zechariah 9:9

There is a question that keeps tapping at the window of my mind. *Why does he accept the label as king now when Jesus has spent his public ministry avoiding it? Why does Luke tell the story the way he does?*

Maybe Luke wants to make it clear that Jesus would not accept the association with Kingship and rule until he had opportunity to correct the popular experience and understanding of what that meant. The current exemplars of kingship and rulers and power were far from Jesus' concept. The two Herods in his lifetime, Quirinius, Procurator Pilate and the Caesars of Rome, had the same leadership model - Power, control and brutal consequences for those who dissented. There are certainly many current examples and throughout history. (1)

This was not what Jesus wanted to be associated with and so he avoids being proclaimed king until he had had a time to reorient his disciples and followers understanding of kingship and power.

In three and a half years he modelled someone who embodies Divine Presence, Mystery, Power and Love. He models a different kind of power than traditional kings :

- He healed the broken and restored people to full participation in community
- He offered forgiveness and grace to those who believed they were unclean or unforgivable or unredeemable. He offered grace to those who changed, repented and moved in a new direction of compassion and away from greed and exploitation. He included them in his new community.
- He healed children to break the bondage of bad theology that blamed bad things on parents, parental conditions and culture (Children of Jairus and the Canaanite woman)
- He had been inclusive, unconditionally accepting, and restorative in his words and actions – of lepers, of children, of women, of Samaritans.

Jesus wanted a new definition of his role and the Reign of God, the Beloved Community. It is not top down. It lifts people up. Luke invites us to participate in this new vision.

There is another dimension to this parade that has been taught in churches that is not accurate or helpful or true. That is the “lamb to the slaughter” image of Christ. This reflects the theology that sacrifices were required to appease God, to please God.

According to Rene Girard, the Gospels speak of “sacrifices” only in order to reject them and deny them any validity. Jesus counters the ritualism of the Pharisees with an anti-sacrificial quotation from Hosea: “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice’” (Matt. 9:13). There is nothing in the Gospels to suggest that the death of Jesus is a sacrifice, whatever definition (substitution, paying a debt) we may give for that sacrifice. At no point in the Gospels is the death of Jesus defined as a sacrifice. (2)

In the Palm Sunday Procession, we do not have a Lamb to the Slaughter, pre-programmed robotic Jesus. Instead we have a living, choosing, inviting Jesus making one of his final offers to the people and powers of Jerusalem. An offer they reject not because they are scripted to do so, but because the cost of compassion and inclusive community is far greater than the system of scapegoating shame and blame religion and power that is in place.

Jesus, “King on a Colt” comes with an offer of alternative living. An inclusive community of compassion and companionship. Where servants not swordsmen have power,... the power of love. A kin-dom of healing and restoration where humans blossom into fruitful beings.

As we enter this Holy Week and reflect on the stories of Jesus’ last days, last supper, last breath, what does it mean to be open to this power of love and compassion that came through the Jerusalem gate?

Jesus goes from walking a crowd shouting Hosanna, save us to a crowd, maybe a different crowd shouting, No, he is not the king we wanted! No, he is going to save us from the Romans! No, he is not taking over with tanks and tons of fire power. He walks with and eats with people who are outsiders and weak and not important. So crucify him. Get rid of him.

In front of us lies the daunting time that we call “Holy Week.” Along the way, we face fears and challenges. We see Jesus confronting religious leaders for turning God’s “house of prayer for all people” into an emporium for profit-making. We see Jesus rejected by those in power, we see justice miscarried, and we even see friends who betray, deny, and abandon Jesus in his hour of need. We hear what may be the most difficult cry in all of literature, when Jesus says, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It is a week that speaks to the most challenging trials that we can face; and so we rightly call it “Holy Week.”

We cannot get into Jesus’ head, to see how he is able to have such resolve in the face of torture or maintain love through broken friendships. We cannot get into the head of Judas, who once intended to follow Jesus but, in the end, betrayed him. We cannot even get into the head of Peter, who out of fear, denies even knowing Jesus. What we can do is to read the

story, see the good and the bad, the hope and the suffering, the ambitions and the failures, to reflect on our own journeys. How does Holy week speak to our fears, our failures, our dashed hopes, and the fragility of our faith? (3)

The church calls this week “Holy Week” not despite the suffering but precisely because of the suffering that it contains. Not all suffering is holy, of course. Too much suffering in the world is the result of violence, injustice, greed, and hate.

However, there is a kind of suffering and grief that comes from the vulnerability of loving. Jesus’ grief, so evident in his prayer in the garden and his cry from the cross, was born out of his love. And, likewise, when we lose someone whom we love, when we are betrayed by someone whom we trust, when we are abandoned by someone on whom we rely, we suffer.

This week offers us the chance to embrace that vulnerability and to face our mortality, to trust in the eternal life and love here now and to open ourselves to grace. To experience ways we participate – we participate in life, in this community as we seek to take our part in the drama of redeeming and compassionate love with people of other faiths.

Participate. Participate in the story, in the ministry. Let’s enter into this week and our spiritual lives. What are our questions, our fears, our hopes, our experiences of the Sacred? Let’s feel our humanity in the fatigue and grief over what we’ve lost and what isn’t working anymore, and just when we have nothing left, do we Jesus did when he borrowed a colt and a borrowed upper room for a shared final meal — let’s borrow boldly from eternal promises of hope and grace and abundant life. Amen.

1) Peter Woods, “Palming off the Donkey King,” 3.22.10, the listeninghermit.com
<https://thelisteninghermit.com/2010/03/22/palming-off-the-donkey-king/>

2) Woods

3) Rev. Mark Davis, St. Mark Extra! April 8, 2022, St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church, Newport Beach, CA
<https://myemail.constantcontact.com/St--Mark-EXTRA-.html?soid=1102441261857&aid=y7hSV3t3Y9Y>