

Luke 19:28-40

²⁸ After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰ 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. ³¹ If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” ³² So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ³⁴ They said, “The Lord needs it.” ³⁵ Then they brought it to Jesus, and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ 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, ³⁸ saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” ³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” ⁴⁰ He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Welcome to Palm Sunday! It is a day of boisterous joy, and I am looking forward to Easter. I can remember kids battling with palm fronds in the church in earlier days and the Choir under the leadership of John Weinhold poking others in the choir and stirring things up. These memories make me smile. But we need to remember that to get to Easter, we go through the betrayal and denial of Jesus and his torture at the hands of the authorities and finally come to the cross where hopelessness reigns. But after a moment, God utters a monumental “No” to his senseless death. and we have the power of the resurrection unleashed in the world.

Palm Sunday begins that final fatal week of Jesus’ earthly ministry.

It features a clash of kingdoms. The day echoes the opening of A Tale of Two Cities. It was the best of times, and it was the worst of times. In one sense, Palm Sunday is the tale of the same city from two different perspectives: God’s and Rome’s.

When I imagine this week's story, I see it as a story, TV show, or movie that begins with a scene captioned one week ago and then begins to tell us how things start. The first scene shows two parades of groups entering Jerusalem, one led by Pontius Pilate and one by Jesus.

According to Luke, Jesus's arrival was a well-planned form of street theatre, beginning with the prearranged fetching of the donkey. This is close to a satire of Pilate's grand entry. Jesus had been teaching in Galilee, and now he came to Jerusalem, a Roman-controlled city that also, in opposition to Rome, represented the hope of the Jewish people. At one end of this city, Pilate arrives with his

troops to remind everyone who is in charge. It's an incredible display of military might, like those old news clips of The USSR armed services marching on May Day. It reminds the people they'd best behave. Pilate is there to keep order in the city, and they better stay in line. He must maintain order in this city with the hint of rebellion in the air and crush any signs of rebellion.

For Jews, this is the season of Passover, when they celebrate their great liberation from Egyptian enslavement. No wonder that many African American religious leaders used this exodus theme and story. The Jewish Passover celebrates breaking the bonds of slavery in the past, combined with the hope that God will do something similar today. That hope fills the air in the days leading up to Passover.

On the other side of town, away from this official entry by Pilate, Jesus the Prince of Peace arrives riding on a donkey, with cloaks being spread. According to the gospel of John, palm fronds are waved, and the crowd calls, "Hosanna," or "Save us now." Every time I read of Palm Sunday, I remember Jesus Christ Superstar and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as it seems to float into town a few inches above the ground, bathing in the adulation until some sing "Won't you die for me" and then his face changes with the realization of what is to come.

But at least for now, he leads a hope-filled, joyous procession.

I don't know how Pilate was greeted, but arrogance, deceit, and unpredictable violence were his main attributes. So, I imagine the people who watched may well have watched in fear that he would do something crazy. Indeed, he was such a lousy leader that Rome recalled him because his violence and arrogance caused more problems than he solved.

Opposite Pilate, Jesus arrives as a peaceful, humble servant. We know he is the Son of the Living God, but his followers and the crowd are not quite sure who he is or what he will do. But there is hope that he is the Messiah, the King sent by God.

But there is no scepter war horse for him, just a humble donkey and some branches waving. And the only crown will be the one he is given later, the Crown of Thorns, but for now, he arrives as the prophet Zechariah says,

(Zechariah 9:9 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

⁹ Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

See, your king comes to you;

triumphant and victorious is he,

humble and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Symbolizing the loving, humble, and sacrificial way of peace. For now, the crowd is jubilant.

The people around Jesus were not excited for the right reasons. They were more excited by his kingship than by what kind of king he would be. They misunderstood his nature and saw him as a victorious messiah who would reform the religion, give the nation back its independence and the great status in the time of David and Solomon, and break the yoke of Roman oppression.

For us, Palm Sunday is about celebrating the true king who comes in the name of the Lord. He comes with a kingdom different from what the Roman Empire imposes.

But remember, and this is crucial then and now. One of the most important things is that since Jesus is king and not someone else, Rome and the Caesars are mere pretenders to the throne. Our first and absolute allegiance is owed to God, not to any human authority. In these two ways, Jesus and Pilate will clash or crash into each other. Jesus' way is self-giving love and sacrifice, and Pilate's way is violence, injustice, and oppression. They can't coexist in the same space; as Jesus says, "We can't serve two masters."

Jesus' entry, contrasted with Pilate's represents what is at stake for people of faith everywhere. The question is, really, what parade will we join, Pilate's or Jesus'.

So, Jesus' parade draws shouts of joy from the crowd, not the looks of terror and fear provoked by Pilate's presence. These shouts of praise from the crowd remind us that deep down in our hearts, we want to belong, believe, and trust. The danger, of course, is that Pilate's reign of fear, force, falsehoods, and oppression will push aside Jesus' path of service, love, and truth, combined with humility and healing.

They seem so different, and to my mind, the one to choose is obvious, except Pilate's kingdom thrives on fear and materialism, not faith, hope, and love. Threats and envy are at work against our faith.

When I grew up in Little Rock, I would attend the annual Christmas Parade. After the Christmas parade passed, when I was still sitting on the curb in front of my dad's store, people would follow along behind the parade. They decided to join in.

This raises a vital question for us: Which parade do we follow? Both pass by every day. Oh, I know it seems so natural to say God's way. We choose the way of love, not fear.

Jesus draws on our hope, love, and faith, and Pilate seems to control us through force, fear, and domination.

But sometimes fear gets us, and like the Pharisees, we want to silence people stirring up trouble. “Shh,” they say, “Don’t rock the boat.”

So, the Pharisees saw the clash between these two cultures in these two processions. And to the eyes of fear, there seems only one good choice: Jesus must be silenced; silence Jesus! Not because they/we agree with Pilate but because they fear him. And it is the Pharisees that express this the best as they tell Jesus to control this crowd and silence them. The Pharisees have no love for Pilate but fear he will unleash his troops if there is even the slightest evidence of insurrection. And they believe many, many people will unjustly suffer if Jesus doesn’t control his people.

Jesus says, “I can’t silence everyone if they are silenced by fear. The rocks will cry out.” This is not just a dumb bag of rocks. The stones are smart enough to recognize their loving creator, who made all Heaven and Earth. All creation will cry out, “Jesus is our lord; save us! Hosanna King Jesus, save us.” Sometimes, we must be like those who hailed Jesus as king. And maybe sometimes, we need to be like the rocks that cry out when others around us are silent and/or afraid.

Someone must cry out “Jesus is Lord!”, so it might as well be us.

I will see you on Maundy, Thursday at 6:30 in the chapel and at Noon on Good Friday in Lincoln Park. Then, we will have our great celebration of new life and resurrection faith.