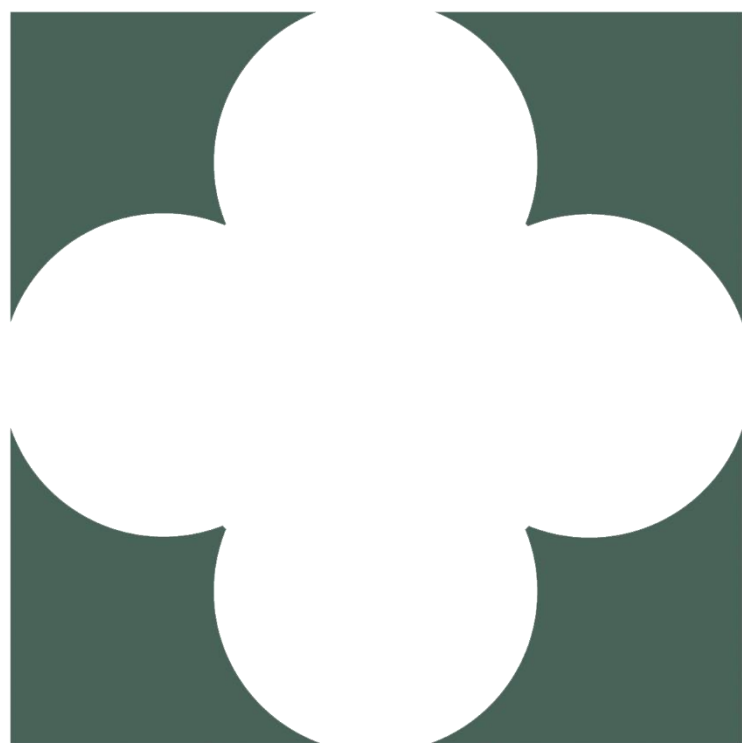


Palm Sunday: A Cautious Celebration

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Luke 19:28-40

After he 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."

Well, our Lenten journey is almost over, yet it intensifies this week as we make our way to the cross and then the empty tomb. I think I have a love hate thing going on with Palm Sunday and Holy Week because it is filled with so many conflicting emotions. Praise, and fear, joy and sorrow, love and betrayal, life and death are all wrapped up in one week.

I guess in reality, some of our days and weeks feel just like that too—they have that queasy rollercoaster feel. How about this past week? It has been a hard week with wars and rumors of wars all over the world. Foremost in our mind is Ukraine, Burma, and Ethiopia. Our hearts break seeing innocent

people killed, raped, and displaced by wars for no reason whatsoever. Make it make sense somebody!

Yet, also this week, many of us rejoiced at the confirmation of soon to be, Justice Kitange Brown Jackson, the first Black woman who will sit on the Supreme Court. And baseball officially started. Woohoo!! Yes, this week has been a roller coaster of emotions. And, if we throw in a health challenge, a death, and a weakening, but still present pandemic, life starts to feel real crazy.

On second thought, maybe it's not so hard to relate to the ups and downs of Palm Sunday and Holy Week because that is how many of us live our lives these days. Good thing we know how the story ends. We know that Love wins. We know that death, evil, and hardship do not have the final say. So if we can hang in there and pray our way through the rough and tumble, we will get to the other side and be in a place of resurrection and Love. But we can't get to Easter without first going through Good Friday. Amen.

We know the story, Jesus entered Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of the Passover. Jerusalem swelled with visitors during Passover as pilgrims made their way to the Temple to celebrate God's deliverance of their foreparents from bondage and slavery.

It was common practice that when there was a large gathering in Jerusalem the Roman governors of Judea would have a military display of power to discourage any revolt by the visiting crowd. Where have we heard that amassing weapons of war leads to peace? I'm not at all sure that it's true. Pilate and the Roman military procession would ride into Jerusalem on war horses, fully armored, with great pomp and circumstance.

Jesus was familiar with the Roman processions and decided to arrange for his own entrance into Jerusalem. He prearranged where the passover meal would be eaten and Jesus prearranged for the animal he would ride as he made his way into Jerusalem. If a king or ruler rode a donkey or colt in a procession, that meant the ruler was coming in peace. The shouting jubilant crowd knew their scriptures. The prophet Zechariah wrote (9:9), "Lo, your

king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey”.

Jesus dispatched his disciples to go get the colt and the disciples even knew the code if questioned about what they were doing. They were instructed to say, *“The Lord has need of it”*.

It was important for Jesus to ride something other than a war horse into Jerusalem because his work was not about war and amassing land. Jesus’ kingdom was not like the Romans, but his realm of authority was much broader than a section of land. The cheering crowd recited Psalm 118:

*blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!*

Pastoral theologian William G. Carter reminds us in *Feasting on the Word* that Luke’s Palm Sunday story echoes his Christmas story of Jesus’ birth. At Jesus’ birth the angels proclaimed, peace on earth, goodwill to all. Now as Jesus enters Jerusalem for the final time, peace is declared in heaven and on earth. Jesus is the Prince of Peace. But my friends, what are the things that make for peace? Are they weapons of mass destruction and intimidation or are they acts of kindness, justice, jobs, clean air, affordable homes, food, and healthcare? I think we are still figuring out the things that make for peace.

When the cheering crowd saw Jesus on a colt, they were convinced he was the one who would save them. Waving palm branches and laying their coats along the way the crowd shouted, *Hosanna, Jesus save us, hosanna!*

Some of the religious leaders told Jesus to quiet his crowd. They said, *Jesus tell them to stop. Tell them to shut up! Tell them to leave, they are making too much noise*. Now, I suspect the religious leaders wanted to quiet the crowd so the Roman authorities wouldn’t think an uprising was taking place. The religious leaders didn’t want the all-too-ready-for-war Roman authorities to think a riot was about to break out and then begin a bloody crackdown. Jesus, tell them to stop shouting and to leave! You are making things dangerous for everyone.

Jesus said, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” It is hard to curtail joy and hope when we can taste and feel a bright new future. The people knew Jesus was the one the scriptures said would come. There was no way Jesus would tell them to be quiet. There is an old gospel song that says,

*This joy I have, the world didn't give it to me.
The world didn't give it, the world can't take it away.*

The prophet Jeremiah said, it is like fire shut up in his bones and he can't contain it or keep it in.

Once we know of God's love, grace and mercy, it is hard to put a cap on our joy—or is it. There are many places in the world where believers are under siege because of their faith. They may be Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, or of another faith. The Uyghurs in China are marginalized and in camps because of their Muslim identity and their Islamic faith.

Would we stop worshipping if told to? What would stop us from putting God first in our lives and stop us from inviting others to know the Love of the Holy One? Would we stop singing songs of praise and offering prayers of peace because life got too hard? If we don't get what we want, will we stop giving God praise? How about health challenges? Are they enough to stop us from walking in the way of Jesus? Is death enough to shake our faith in the one who is alpha and omega the beginning and the end?

Jesus said, if we stop giving God praise, the rocks will shout out. My friends, I don't know about you, but I want to do my own shouting. I don't want any rocks crying out for me. I know what God can do, and I'm not ashamed to tell the whole world about it.

The crowd singing hosanna and peace in heaven would be sorely tested as the week continued. Oh, if we only knew the things that make for peace—beginning with a heart centered in the Love of God. Today we rejoice that Jesus entered Jerusalem that final time. Today we rejoice that Jesus has made a way into our hearts and made a difference in our lives.

When Good Fridays appear in our lives, and they will, let us remember this joy. We know how the story ends. We will have victory, but we will go through trials and tribulations. But hold on and keep your joy. Keep your faith. Keep believing. And keep praising God, for we know in the end Love wins. Amen

Now, let us rejoice and sing our closing hymn #216, *All Glory, Laud, and Honor*.