

“Preparing”

Lent 2019 - “With All Your Heart” – part #6

Luke 19:28-44

I love a good parade. Two of my favorite parade memories are marching in Pasadena in the Parade of Roses with Northwestern’s band in 1996 on New Year’s Day, and driving my parent’s convertible through the streets of East Tawas on the 4th of July. You have to learn to practice your wave – elbow, elbow, wrist, wrist, but also, don’t let go of the steering wheel and pay attention so you don’t hit anyone walking in front of you! Yes, parades make for good times and often powerful memories.

Most of us, when we picture a parade, think of a holiday celebration, but not all parades are joyous. Take for example, funeral processions; they are also a type of parade. Consider the images from the Great March on Washington in 1963 with Martin Luther. Or more recently the March for Women in January 2017, held simultaneously in many places, including Traverse City. These gatherings are just as important, but the atmosphere is much more serious, contentious, and even dangerous.

Today is Palm Sunday, when we read the traditional story of Jesus and his final entry into Jerusalem. How would you describe this parade? Who was it really for, and what were the people thinking? And most importantly, what does this story tell us about Jesus?

These are the questions I have in mind as we look into this story as Luke retells it in chapter 19. In particular, I want you to notice the extreme contrast of emotions. It begins like a good suspense story or mystery. Jesus gives cryptic

instruction to his disciples. Go into town, find the donkey, use the password, "The Lord needs it." Right away, we know something unusual is about to happen.

The crowds begin to gather. Jesus' disciples are anticipating the excitement. To get the full impact of this story, you need to know the geography of Jerusalem. Basically, the whole city sits on a large hill. Across the valley are the villages of Bethany and Bethphage, situated on the far side of the Mount of Olives. Once they crested the hill, they had a gorgeous view of the city and the temple. Even without the temple, I'm told it is still an awe-inspiring view today. Imagine how the people would have swelled with pride. Their capitol, their home, the literal presence of God awaiting them. They would have thrown Tootsie rolls, if they had them. So they did the next best thing: they laid their coats down on the road to keep the dust away. Notice, Luke omits something we took for granted. Where are the palms? I guess we should call this "Coat Sunday." That works, with the snow we had this week! But I will understand if you don't want to wave your coat around while we are singing today.

The way the gospels describe the scene, it is an exciting parade. The people are shouting, "Hosanna!" God, save us! Luke specifically tells us they were saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord," words directly from Psalm 118, the words of the ancient Jewish holiday psalms. It would be similar to us breaking out into, "God bless America," or a brass band playing, "Stars and Stripes Forever." They were that energized.

But the Jewish disciples were not the only ones there. There was, of course, the Roman presence. Pilate the governor would have just entered the city earlier the same day, on a horse, surrounded by his army, with much pomp and

celebration. The soldiers would have been on high alert, carefully watching this band of rag-tag disciples progressing through the valley, cheering.

Jesus is entering Jerusalem as a king, Luke says, but with vastly different posturing than any military leader. Jesus rides on a donkey – a humble animal. Clearly, Jesus’ kingdom is unlike anything the world has seen.

As Jesus approaches the city gates, more sinister elements enter the story. First, the Pharisees demand, “Rebuke your disciples. Tell them to be quiet.” Jesus says, “No way. If they did not, the very stones would shout.” This sounds like a double rebuke. Not only does Jesus not submit to their demand, perhaps he is also alluding to Habakkuk 2:9-11.

“Woe to him who builds his house by unjust gain,
setting his nest on high
to escape the clutches of ruin!
You have plotted the ruin of many peoples,
shaming your own house and forfeiting your life.
The stones of the wall will cry out,
and the beams of the woodwork will echo it.

Maybe the stones will cry out in joy, or maybe in sorrow or accusation. Maybe all of the above. There seems to be conflicting emotions in this scene, strong contrasts of wills and of character. The people shouting joyfully; the Pharisees sneering; the Romans tense, wondering if this parade will turn into a riot. And all this in the midst of the great holiday of Passover, the highest “independence day” celebration of the Jewish people.

What is really happening? What are we really celebrating today? We wave our palms, we sing our songs, we pray, we give. But do we see the whole story?

Are we only focusing on the highlights we love, while forgetting the real meaning of what is happening?

For many of us, the Palm Sunday story is like standing on the sidewalk, waving your flag on the 4th of July, saying, “Wow! Look! A firetruck!” Do you know what a firetruck represents? Rescue in the face of extreme danger. Those men and women driving it? They are the ones who risk their lives to save others. The same could be said about the veterans and active military who march on Memorial Day and Veterans Day. These are men and women whom we honor and celebrate, who took untold risks to save us. I’m not saying that we have to be somber and serious the whole time. It is, after all, a celebration. But the whole story needs to be told, for the purpose is not just flag waving and candy grabbing.

On the first Palm Sunday, Jesus knows what was about to happen. In six short days, he will hang on a Roman cross – dying on an instrument of torture and repression. It was the worst, most agonizing torture the Romans could invent. The crosses were strategically placed on the roads leading into many cities to warn off potential rebels – this is what will happen to you! Jesus knows. Jesus is no longer hiding in the Galilean backcountry. He is in the capital of one of the most contentious Roman provinces, surrounded by people who love him, hate him, and suspect him. Jesus is on shaky ground, yet his crowd of disciples seem blissfully unaware.

Put yourself in Jesus’ place for a moment. What would you do under all this pressure? I’d run away, to be perfectly honest. Not so the Son of God, thankfully. Jesus never once shirked away from his purpose. He knew that his death alone would bring us forgiveness of sins and peace with God. And so he gives his final speech before he enters the city.

Look at Luke 19:41-44 again with me.

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.”

Pop quiz: how many times in the Bible is it recorded that Jesus wept?

Three times, specifically, although we may certainly assume there were more.

First, when Jesus’ friend Lazarus died. Recall the shortest verse in the Bible: John 11:35, “Jesus wept.” Second, in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus prayed with tears and blood. (Noted in Luke 22:44 and Hebrews 5:7) And the third one is here, before Jerusalem. “If only you had known what would bring you peace!”

What would bring his people peace? His sacrifice. His body. His blood. His love.

Jesus predicts a terrible prophecy which came to pass in AD 70. This is how one historian puts it:

In A.D. 66, the Jews, who were subject to Rome, revolted against the empire. This plunged the Hebrews into several years of bloody conflict with the Romans. Titus, son and successor of the famous Vespasian, overthrew the city of Jerusalem (after a five-month siege) in the summer of A.D. 70. The holy city was burned (cf. Matthew 22:7), and the “sanctuary” (temple) was demolished.¹

Instead of choosing peace, the Jews chose violence. It is no wonder, from our perspective in the future, that Jesus wept over his beloved city that he came

¹ (<https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/14-daniels-prophecy-of-the-seventy-weeks>)

to save. If you knew, personally, how many people died in sacrifice for our freedom, you would be weeping at the 4th of July parades as well.

It is Jesus final words in this passage that should put our celebration on Palm Sunday in proper perspective. Yes, this is a happy parade. Yes, Jesus triumphantly entered Jerusalem, literally, the city of peace. But if we only celebrate the parade without knowing the whole story, knowing the crucifixion that is to come, we completely miss the point. In Christ’s own words, “You did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.” (Luke 19:44)

Jesus could very well say this to any of us. Do you recognize that God has come to you? Have you received him?

Jesus told his disciples concerning the donkey, “The Lord needs it.” How much more does Jesus need us? “Are we ready to carry the weight of the gospel beyond the parade into the rough places where darkness and death overwhelm? Will we carry the good news to the oppressed and those whose hearts are in need of binding up, even if it means putting ourselves in danger?”²

The people lifted up shouts of joy while they laid down their coats. Might there be things in our lives we need to lay down? Things that prevent us from fully loving and worshipping our heavenly king? Our pride, our hurt, our anger, our sin, our grudges, our depression our apathy, our excuses. Jesus came to save, to heal, and to restore. He was not afraid to lay down his life for us. He did so with tears.

Palm Sunday is not just a celebration day. It is not just an excuse to think about palm trees and wave our hands and smile. It is truly both Palm Sunday and

² Todd Pick. <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lent-2019-worship-planning-series/april-14-palm-passion-sunday-year-c/palm-passion-sunday-2019-year-c-preaching-notes>

Passion Sunday, for it marks the beginning of the most sacred week of the holy Christian year. A week filled with sorrow, betrayal, the Last Supper, a sleepless night of prayer, of taking on the cup of sorrow that the Father gave to him. Will we see the presence of God in our midst and surrender our whole lives to him? Or will this just be another ordinary Sunday, an ordinary week, a check in the box?

This Friday at 7 PM we have the amazing opportunity to worship with one voice at the Ecumenical Good Friday service at St. Luke’s Catholic Church. To be perfectly honest, I expect every single one of you to be there. Why? Not for me, even though I’m one of the preachers. Not for our church, so we can say that we brought the most worshippers to service. For one reason only: to glorify God in Jesus Christ, who willingly went to the cross to save us for our sin. It is his blood that saves us, his blood that justifies us, his life that gives us the opportunity to spend eternity with him in heaven.

I do not want to weep anymore because there are those in this world who did not recognize Jesus coming to them. In the news this week, I read that 23% of Americans now claim no religion. The “nones” N-O-N-E-S, now even outnumber those who claim to be Catholics or Evangelicals. More than ever, God needs our witness, our courage, our decision to go out and invite someone to hear the truth!

Get excited, church! And get serious. Serve God as if this week was your last. And bring some good food to the Easter breakfast, too. It will be a celebration as we worship the risen Savior, our king, Jesus.