

“Entering Jerusalem – Peacefully” – Luke 19:28-40 – April 14, 2019

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Over the past six weeks we have journeyed alongside Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, and today he has finally arrived. With his disciples, Jesus has done what Jewish pilgrims across the countryside have done – come to Jerusalem to for the Festival of the Passover. Yet his arrival signals more than simple observance of a holy day. He is fulfilling his destiny. As they drew close to the city, Jesus sent his disciples to pick up a young donkey to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah, which says “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! 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.” (Zech 9:9)

Doing as they were told, the disciples brought the colt, draped his back with their cloaks, and set Jesus upon him. As Jesus rode along the final two miles into the city, people tossed their cloaks on the road in front of him. The disciples, filled with joy, began to praise God with shouts and singing. When the path began to head down the hill, the disciples starting praising God with shouts of joy. These disciples had been with him and had witnessed his deeds and heard his message.

Harkening back to his first sermon in his hometown synagogue, we recall that Jesus read a passage from Isaiah and proclaimed himself as the one to fulfill those words. Remember when Jesus had come to his hometown synagogue back at the beginning of his ministry? That he had come bringing liberation – of giving sight to the blind, good news to the poor and release to the captives. The folks in Nazareth took offense at his message, but his disciples had seen the truth of his words – witnessing the healings and the exorcisms. They saw him calm a storm, raise the dead, and feed a multitude with bread and fish.

These disciples would have known the prophecy of Zechariah. They understood the significance of the king riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. And they really thought, as they headed toward Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover, that the time for Jesus to take political power had come. They had ignored his warnings that he would suffer and die. Israel’s Messiah was not supposed to die.

They were caught up in the excitement of this mini parade, an impromptu affair to celebrate their Lord and proclaim him king. They shouted with joy and praised God, saying “Blessed is the king, who comes in the name of the Lord!” Those words probably turned a few heads. And then they cried out, “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” With the words peace and glory in heaven Luke transports us back 30 some years to when, out on a lonely hillside in Bethlehem, a host of angels appeared in front of some startled shepherds and called out to them, “Glory to

God in the highest, and peace on earth among those whom he favors.” (Luke 2:14) Those angels spoke of the birth of a king, of a savior who would bring peace by dethroning the powerful and lifting up the oppressed. A king who would reign not by the sword, but by love. A savior who would usher in God’s kingdom, a kingdom in which the poor, the downtrodden and the lowly would find themselves on top. A king that would reverse all expectations!

On Christmas Eve, echoing the heavenly host, we proclaim words of “Peace on earth, good will to all, glory to God in the highest.” We stand alongside amazed shepherds in a stable in Bethlehem. We gaze adoringly into the manger, and wonder at the promise that this baby represents. And these same words bring us full circle to the cross on a hill on Good Friday. It has been said that the manger has always stood in the shadow of the cross. The message of the Christmas season has always been the message of Easter. This is the theme that has run throughout Luke’s gospel, this reversal of expectation. It is a message of foolishness to those who do not understand. But it is a message that Jesus has proclaimed all along. A message he obediently follows all the way to the cross. (from *Season’s Greetings*, a sermon by Thomas Long)

Some Pharisees who were in the crowd heard what the disciples were shouting and singing, and they were concerned. They called out to Jesus, “Tell your disciples to be quiet! They’re causing a commotion!” This was the kind of commotion that could draw the attention of the Roman authorities. During the time of the Passover, thousands of pilgrims would come into the city of Jerusalem, and the Romans were always on alert for any type of uprising. It could be that these Pharisees were trying to be helpful, to keep Jesus from getting into trouble by the authorities.

But this is why Jesus came. Even though the disciples might not fully understand what type of king he was, Jesus was the king. And it was right for them to call out and praise God. Jesus wasn’t interested in hiding his identity. The truth of God cannot be hidden. It must be proclaimed. So Jesus responded to the Pharisees, “Even if they stop, these very stones along the way will shout out!” Of course he didn’t mean that literally. But the point Jesus was making is that nothing could keep the message silent. Even the very creation longs to participate in the act of redemption.

The prophet Isaiah gives us the image of how the reign of God’s peace will look, with the bears and cows grazing together, the lion and lamb resting side by side. Other signs in creation have already occurred. A star appeared in the sky to announce the birth of Jesus. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, an eclipse darkened the sky. And at the moment of his death, an earthquake struck. These images of creation being affected by God’s redemptive work remind us of how intimately tied to this earth we really are. As the Apostle Paul writes in his letter to the church in Rome, “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.” (Rom 8:21) (From *Luke*, Fred Craddock, p.228)

Jesus wouldn't allow these Pharisees to rain on this little parade. Jesus and his disciples had been through a lot together. They were exulting in the moment, praising God and expressing their great joy. The disciples were showing dedication, loyalty and support for their teacher, their lord and their king. They didn't know it yet, because they had not really listened to Jesus' predictions of his passion, but the next few days would begin to turn ugly. Perhaps if they had really understood what was to come, they might have disbanded the parade before it even began. A storm cloud loomed on the horizon, and soon the disciples would find themselves scattering in all directions. One disciple would betray Jesus, another would deny him.

The message of the peace would stand up to the worldly message of power. Domination and control would try to silence the message of peace, using force and violence to try to stifle it. Jesus would proclaim this message all the way to the cross. It falls in line with everything Jesus had said and done up to this point - about the last being first, about shaming the powerful, about exalting the lowly, about a servant king, a messiah that suffers. A Messiah that is willing to die for his message of peace. It was the ultimate gift of love. And it is a message about a God who grieved the death of Jesus so much that, out of love and out of compassion, brought life from that death, raising Jesus on the third day.

In the very next verse following our gospel lesson, when Jesus actually entered the city, he wept for Jerusalem. He wept because they did not recognize what was right there in front of them. His message of peace did not resonate with what they had expected from their messiah. They wanted the mighty conqueror not the Good Shepherd. They wanted the powerful ruler; instead they got the Prince of Peace. In the coming days, many would away from Jesus because they thought he spoke nonsense, and his death on the cross seemed to validate their disdain. A Messiah who can't even keep himself alive?

A master who is the servant, a king who rides into town on a humble donkey, a messiah who dies. It doesn't make a lot of sense, but this is the message of peace and reversals. And this is the truth that we are called to proclaim throughout the world, even though the world may scoff at what we say and consider the message to be pure foolishness. Freedom for the oppressed, release to the captives, sight to the blind. The first will be last, and the last will be first. Freedom from all forms of bondage. That is why Jesus came into the world. And we are called to be his disciples, praising God and announcing his message of hope for the hopeless.

And now the journey of Lent is coming to an end, the arrival at Jerusalem is at hand. The obedience of Jesus to his message of peace is about to play out. To be continued...