

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
Palm Sunday
6th Sunday in Lent
April 14, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Zechariah 14:1-9

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Luke 19:28-40 NRSV

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."

Palms, Stones, and Pharisees

One of the great challenges for a preacher, on Palm Sunday and Easter, is trying to present any kind of new insight into very familiar scripture. On this **sixth Sunday in Lent**, we are celebrating **Palm Sunday**. We dutifully wave our palms and shout, "Hosannah!", and often we are carried by a wave of **joy** and enthusiasm. It is part of church tradition. Even reading the scripture, especially aloud, a **sense of excitement** builds throughout the verses. This merges with our anticipation of the end of the somewhat long **Lenten season**. Listen again to this portion of the scripture.

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!"

Luke 19:36-38 NRSV

Who is getting the **attention** here? Jesus, of course. Whatever led up to this moment, it sounds like it took on a life of its own. It just **gathered momentum** and kept going. There is this sense of **adoration**: an enthusiastic crowd shouting out the name of **Jesus of Nazareth**. No one is questioning Jesus or his position, or how he even got to this point. The only thing sounding like a reflection or **judgement** is the statement from the Pharisees demanding that Jesus stop this whole thing!

Apparently, most of the crowd assembled and shouting are the **disciples** and other faithful followers of Jesus. They have grown in number considerably since Jesus encountered the original four fishermen, followed by choosing the remaining twelve disciples. Exact names differ, as you can learn from further reading (*Mark* 1:16-20; *Luke* 5:1-11, 6:12-16). As Jesus proceeds through this celebration, he borrows from **scripture**, as he often does, and tells the **Pharisees** nearby that even the **lifeless stones** have greater insight than those who refuse to listen. He is borrowing from the minor prophet, Habakkuk. These verses echo our reading from *Zechariah*.

Alas for you who get evil gain for your houses, setting your nest on high to be safe from the reach of harm! You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life. The very stones will cry out from the wall, and the plaster will respond from the woodwork.

Habakkuk 2:9-11 NRSV

So, this is a great time to look back and see how we got to this parade and demonstration. In the *Gospel of Luke*, Jesus has been intentionally traveling for weeks, perhaps months, to reach **Jerusalem**. Some people find this unusual, because looking on a map it appears to be a **winding route** through the countryside. However, Jesus and his entourage are ascending nearly three thousand feet in elevation and likely walking the entire way. For comparison, traveling by foot today in South Carolina you would be walking from Summerville on the coast to the top of Caesar's Head at the border with North Carolina. You wouldn't make a straight line to accomplish that. The easier route for walking is to follow the ridge lines, because they have the least change in elevation, saving you energy and sparing the pack animals you might have with you. And, that road in Palestine was constructed on the crest of the hills.

This makes for a **longer trip**, but it was easier all around. It definitely was not the shortest route to Jerusalem. But, what better way to **reach out** to the people? They were teaching and **healing** and preaching as they went to Jerusalem. Now, they are at their intended goal.

But, there are several ways to enter the city of Jerusalem. Jesus chose to come down from the Mount of Olives, reflecting the scriptures. It is a procession that resembles a **royal reception**. The people are placing their cloaks, literally the **clothes on their backs**, on the ground, so that the colt and Jesus himself would be **protected** from the dust and dirt. There are no palms mentioned in *Luke*, but it is still a procession fit to **crown a king**. Processions like these are described in the Hebrew scriptures and many other ancient sources. And the words that follow our scripture lesson refer to the **destruction** of the city of Jerusalem, very much like an **apocalypse**, which did take place in 70 CE at the hands of a Roman army.

The city in front of them has been built up and torn down several times. In fact, Jesus is headed toward the **second temple** which was constructed hundreds of years before this time. (For more detail, you can read *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* in the Old Testament.) And, this reconstructed temple was refurbished and updated by King Herod. In this time, it is a gleaming structure and the **center of worship** for everyone of the Hebrew faith.

But, even the temple has a rival this day: The cheering and exultation are for Jesus. It is both fanfare and an **historical enactment**. Jesus was at the **height** of his popularity as he made his procession to the temple. This is what we celebrate on **Palm Sunday**. But, there are big **changes** ahead for Jesus and the disciples as a result of continuing confrontation with the religious and **political** authorities. And, those familiar with the Gospel story know what will follow: a night of **prayer** in the Garden of Gethsemane; the **Last Supper**; the arrest of Jesus; the his mockery of a trial; the cruel **punishment**; and, the suffering from physical abuse, injury, **dehydration**, isolation, and hunger. For many years, the church called this portion of the Gospel the **Passion** of Jesus. It is hardly a celebration: a stark contrast the event we feature in scripture today. Swiftly, the followers of Jesus have picked up their clothes and moved off somewhere and **abandoned** him altogether.

Looking toward the end of this week, we recall that Jesus was placed on the cross. There, **death** came slowly through dehydration and exposure. Literally, the person on the cross suffocated or died of heart failure. Jesus, the Son of God, died a slow agonizing and painful death: alone, in agony, and virtually naked. Through all of it, only the women remained faithful to the end. The disciples, those who professed their **love and loyalty**, are gone. Where was the **crowd** that supported him on that day?

They are **hiding**. And, sadly this is where you and I come in. For all our enthusiasm for Jesus, under these **same circumstances** nearly everyone of us would have hidden, as well. Like the crowd, we have **picked up our cloaks**, and returned to our homes. We saw the crowd at Golgotha, and **shrunk away**, out of sight. Even Peter said, “**I do not know him.**” (Luke 22:54-62)

The story we have before us mentions the crowd demonstrating their love and loyalty for Jesus. In this time today of jubilation and celebration, we often focus on the **palms** and branches waving and the crowd placing their clothes on the ground **in tribute** to Jesus (*Matthew* 21:8 , *Mark* 11:8-9). Jesus is excited about all of this, as well. He compares those resisting his ministry to **stones**. But, the **Pharisees** were the wake-up call. These rather rigid keepers of the Jewish faith felt that Jesus and his followers were **unworthy** of their devotion. They wanted a more glamorous and sensational version of the **Messiah**. And, over a few days events began to change quite rapidly.

And, yet, there is much for us to learn from this time of brief, ecstatic **celebration**. With all that has transpired in our lesson today and all that lies ahead through the events of Holy Week, we have to remind ourselves of this: the **saving work** of Christ is **hidden** in plain sight! According to **Jill Duffield**, editor of “The Presbyterian Outlook,”

Christ the Prophet, Priest and King is in the midst of us. Praise, joy and song are the right response. Blessing, peace and glory are present and surely coming. The immediate future is not (very) bright: weeping, betrayal, denial, are all on the horizon, and yet, the ultimate future is sure, forgiveness, reconciliation, and the reign of God **relentlessly** on the way.

<http://pres-outlook.org/category/ministry-resources/looking-into-the-lectionary/>.

March 18, 2016.

Theologian Frederick Buechner echoes this. He tells us that we are standing as mystified as the adoring crowd.:

Because we do not know what he comes to give.

The things that make for peace, that is what he comes to give.

(Buechner, A Room Called Remember)

Jesus is trying to **give these gifts** as he enters Jerusalem, but it is the wrong setting and the **wrong time**. The crowd, and even the disciples, were not willing to look past the **miracles and the healing**. They heard the words and marveled, but they did not believe fully in his **power** or his **purpose**. It would take another even more dramatic event to bring them to a place where they could **believe**. And, that came through the death and **resurrection** of Jesus Christ.

And, now, we enter the final week of **preparation** for the great day of resurrection: **Easter Sunday**. And, God has been with us throughout this time of preparation and throughout our entire lives. God remains with us to **strengthen our resolve** and to stand with us in times of pain, of sorrow, of loneliness, and of anger. This is possible, because this story **does not stop** with a dispersing crowd at the temple mount. Because of the full Gospel story, you and I are **transformed** by the gift of God's transforming **grace** and the love that Almighty God gives to us.

This is the week where we focus on **Jesus Christ**. We move from palm and cloaks to betrayal, torture, death, and **resurrection**. Like the stones and the Pharisees, even we should **respond** to the mission and ministry of Jesus. But, it is the **resurrection** that completes the story, and **reconciles us** to God.

Stan Reid © 2019