

Palm Sunday (Year C)

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.'

If the stones could shout out, as Jesus suggests they are capable of, they would likely tell the story of two kings who entered Jerusalem from separate entrances. After all, these stones lined the roads that these kings used to make their "triumphant" entries. Both kings entered Jerusalem around the time of the Passover, but for very different reasons.

The first king entered Jerusalem from the west, having just conquered another territory.¹ The chief reason for this parade was to demonstrate his military might and to revel in their victory. The poor people would be pushed back so the wealthy observers could have the best views as the king and his army pranced into town with their flashy armor and shiny swords. Chariots, helmets, spears, the whole deal - this was about spectacle. The king came in on a grand stallion, perfectly groomed with a shiny sheen for all to admire. This was about intimidation and control. The ultimate display of political empire.

However, there was another reason this first king entered Jerusalem at the time of the Passover. The Romans wanted to keep the Jews of Jerusalem under control. Passover, after all, was a reminder of the time that God saved the Israelites from the oppression of the Egyptians. At the time this story was being celebrated, the Romans didn't want the Jews to get any ideas about freedom (we all know what a

¹ With much thanks to Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan for this imagery of the two processions. Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 1-5.

contagious idea *that is!*). And what better way to remind them of their place as an occupied people than to parade into the entrance of Jerusalem, displaying Rome's strength at the occasion of another colonial victory. The name of this first king was Pontius Pilate.

The second king, however, entered Jerusalem from the east, from the Mount of Olives. He had conquered no territory, secured no military victories. Instead of pushing the poor people back, everyone was invited to come view his entrance. This procession had no weapons to see, no chariots, helmets, spears, or shiny objects. There was no army following as far as the eye could see. In fact, this second king did not process in on a grand stallion. Instead, he entered on a colt, an unthinkable act for a kingly ruler. This king had no interest in intimidation or control. He had no concern for a display of political empire because his kingdom superseded any earthly kingdom.

This second king, coming in on that lowly colt, had done many great things. And that's why the crowds were calling him "blessed." They had heard many stories. Stories of him curing a man with an unclean spirit. Stories of him healing a woman with a high fever. Stories of healing a leper and a paralytic. Stories of him saying that "blessed are the poor, the hungry, and those who weep." Stories of him preaching love for their enemies - something that no Roman emperor would *ever* say. They had heard parables that he had told, stories passed through the grapevine. They had even heard a story of him feeding five thousand plus people with nothing more than a few loaves of bread and a couple fish.

These were the reasons they were saying "blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." These were the reasons they said "peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven." They wanted peace and they wanted someone to win it for them because they could not do so without help. They wanted this king to overthrow the Romans but it was yet to be seen whether or not he would do so in the fashion that they expected. The name of this second king was Jesus Christ.

If the stones could shout out, they would tell the stories of these two kings - two kings with very different styles and very different messages. One king wishes to dominate and intimidate, the other wishes to invite and to heal. One king processes in after a military victory, the other king does so after preaching about turning the other cheek. One king is followed by an endless trail of mighty warriors, the other king is followed by a bunch of fishermen, tax-collectors, and other commoners with no weapons. One king approaches Jerusalem from the west, the other from the east.

The two are bound to collide. And collide they will.

You see, this collision was predicted by some of the Pharisees; particularly, the ones that implored Jesus to silence his followers, the ones saying "blessed is the king!" The Pharisees liked to play nice with the Romans and they knew that this display of political controversy would no doubt attract the attention of the Romans, particularly the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who had entered the city only days prior to keep a firm hand on any potential insurrection by the Jews.

But the second king, Jesus, was not the only leader stirring the pot. Pontius Pilate did not understand the Jews very well and decided that, rather than try to understand them, he would alienate and threaten them. He did so by placing golden shields of Roman deities in the Temple itself, an act of supreme insult to the Jewish religion.²

²J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary (Premier Reference Series)*, III ed., ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 1133.

Therefore, both of these kings were stirring the pot in their own ways - Pilate, by asserting supreme Roman authority, and Jesus, by challenging that authority.

But the way that Jesus chose to challenge this authority is peculiar. He did not challenge this authority by raising an army of his own - to be certain, a task Jesus could have done had he wished to do so. Instead he asserted the authority of God by embodying another kind of law, a law to love one another at whatever cost.

Today is the beginning of what we call Holy Week. The entirety of the season of Lent prepares us for the dramatic events that are to follow as we watch this collision happen. This congregation has much work to do and I invite you to join us as we walk with Jesus to the cross and the empty tomb. Simply put, there is something to do every day this week to follow this "second king" who chooses to come into Jerusalem on no high horse, but instead on a lowly colt to demonstrate power through love instead of power through violence and oppression. There is a story to be told, the most important story of our faith, and we will gather together to tell this story.

If the stones in the walls of that upper room could talk, they would tell the story of Jesus inviting his friends to the Table on Maundy Thursday, breaking bread with them. The stones would tell us the story of how Jesus broke the bread and poured the cup, distributing the bread of life and the cup of salvation. They would tell us of how Jesus got on his knees and washed the feet of his disciples, an act that would be laughable to think of Pontius Pilate doing.

If the stones in the walls of that upper room could talk, they would tell the story of how Satan entered the heart of Judas. They would tell the story of Jesus telling his disciples of a new commandment, more powerful than any edict Pontius Pilate could ever pronounce, a command to love one another just as Jesus had loved them. The stones would tell us that Jesus told them (and us) that they will know we are his disciples by the love we show for one another.

If the stones in the gate of the Garden of Gethsemane could talk, they would tell us of Jesus meeting the guards on Good Friday to take him away for crucifixion. They would tell us that one of Jesus' followers cut off one of the guard's ears and that Jesus, continuing his act of love to the end, healed that man's ear.

If the stones in Herod's palace could talk, they would tell us that an innocent man was being sentenced to death for no reason other than his inconvenient gospel of love and life. They would tell us that he was beaten and made to carry the very cross upon which he would hang.

If the stones of the hill of Golgotha could talk, they would tell us of Jesus crying for God to forgive the very people who were crucifying him. They would tell us that he took his final breath and died.

If the stone that sealed the tomb could speak, it would tell us of Jesus' lifeless body lying cold in that dark hole.

And, if we stick around long enough, that same stone might just tell us a different story one week from today.

Friends, if we were silent, and did not tell this story, the story that begins today with Palm Sunday, the stones themselves would shout out. But there is no need for that. We will tell the story. This week will be one filled with reading, with prayer, and perhaps some tears as well. But the tears will not last, for good news is on the way. Let's gather and tell it together.