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Luke 19:28-40

Glory, Laud, Honor, and Ash

We have finally arrived in Jerusalem.... In Luke's gospel, Jesus "set his face toward Jerusalem" weeks ago, way back in chapter 9. We've followed as he made his way through village and town from Galilee, through Nabatea and Samaria, into Judea. When he and the disciples reach Jericho (nine chapters later), he reminds them—and us—"we are going up to Jerusalem... everything written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be accomplished" (Luke 18:31).

At that time of year, the caravan road between Jericho and Jerusalem would have been packed with Jewish pilgrims. First-century Jerusalem was a city of 80 to 100 thousand. Yet, during Passover, observant Jews would swell the city population to half-a-million or more.

It's only fourteen miles from Jericho to Jerusalem. Pilgrims would take the caravan road west, climbing a 3,300-foot change in elevation in order to reach the city. Healthy adults can make the climb in 9-hours.

In the weeks before Passover, the citizens of Jerusalem would have watched a steady stream of people entering the gates of the walled city. Not all of them were pilgrims.

Before Passover, the Roman Prefect, Pontius Pilate would leave his coastal palace at Caesarea Maritima for Jerusalem. He was intent on keeping the peace in this hotbed of insurrection—by force if necessary. As he paraded into town, he would have been accompanied by a full complement of Rome's finest centurions. Imagine how the earth and the citizens trembled at the sound of their hobnailed, sandal-booted feet.

Luke tells us that Herod Antipas was also in Jerusalem that year. The Jewish king, son of Herod the Great, left behind his palatial home in Tiberias of Galilee accompanied by an entourage of courtiers and palace guards. Can't we imagine this second "parade of the powerful" entering the city gate?

Finally, there would've been a veritable parade of sacrificial animals coming in through the Sheep Gate. Year-old lambs and kids, without blemish, were the required for the Passover observance. Estimates place the numbers of animals sacrificed in the tens of thousands—all done on the eve of Passover. Imagine the flocks of shepherds and lambs pouring into the temple where they will become the Passover sacrifice and the Passover meal.

Conqueror, king, sacrifice... They all parade into the city.

I've always wondered what the people thought when Jesus and his followers entered the city. What I know is that they are witness to a carefully orchestrated bit of political theater—Jesus is intentionally, unmistakably, and publicly claiming his identity as Messiah.

Jesus and his inner circle—the twelve—and a great crowd of followers reach the area around Bethphage and Bethany. Jesus sends two disciples to fetch an unbroken colt. "The Lord needs it" they are instructed to tell the owners and they will tell them this as they untie the colt and lead it away. I think the owners followed out of sheer curiosity to see what "the Lord" could do with a fractious colt.

The colt itself has special significance in the stories of the Jewish people.

When King David named Solomon his successor, Solomon rode his father's mule across the Kidron Valley beside the Gihon Spring into the City of David. His coronation became a festive parade cheered on by the people of the city.

Later, the prophet Zechariah would prophesy the coming messianic redemption saying, "Rejoice greatly, 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" (Zechariah 9:9).

His disciples will throw their cloaks on this colt and on the road. And as we might expect, the cloaks ALSO have significance in the stories of the Jewish people.

Elisha anointed the military commander Jehu as King of Israel before sending him to overthrow Ahab and Jezebel. After the anointing, Jehu's officers spread their cloaks before him, blow the trumpet and proclaim, "Jehu is king" (2 Kings 9:13).

The disciples lead the colt back to Jesus. This "unbroken" animal that has never known a saddle or rider will placidly carry Jesus across the Mount of Olives, through the Kidron Valley and into Jerusalem, the City of David.

The people who accompany Jesus throw their cloaks on the roadway and raise the song, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" (Luke 19:38).

All the signs are in place—this is a victory parade. The crowd is swept away cheering Jesus on as conqueror and king.

Have you ever experienced what it's like to be swept away in the moment, to be swept away with the crowd?

Kyle Field has the reputation as the loudest sporting venue in the NCAA—but the noise filling Houston's Compaq Center during the first WNBA Championship game was beyond anything I'd ever experienced.

Heart pounding with excitement, ears deafened by the cheering crowd, eyes fixed on the game, body poised for celebration; the clock crept slowly down to zero. There's the buzzer, a roar from the crowd, and the blare of music; confetti streams down as we celebrate. This was 1997, women's professional basketball had arrived, and Texas was home to its number one team—the Houston Comets.

I was there and it's a feeling I'll never forget.

There was elation and excitement and strangely enough, hope. The ticker-tape parade would happen days later, but in that moment, I felt a kinship—a special bond—with everyone in the arena... even the fans from New York!

Have you been there? Felt the pounding excitement of something extraordinary? Felt as if you're part of something bigger? Something amazing?

I wonder—as I read this story—what the cheering crowd thought of the parade they were cheering?

We can imagine, can't we, that they are celebrating the promise of Jesus, expressing their hope in Jesus, shouting their deep desire for Jesus to liberate them from Rome and its collaborators.

We participate in this story, waving palms and echoing the refrain of "Glory, Laud and Honor." Yet, on this Palm Sunday, we also know the willing obedience of Jesus—who will steadfastly refuse to wield power in the way of the world. Jesus has orchestrated his entry into Jerusalem. Yet he rides the colt of a donkey, not as a conquering hero, but as God's humble servant king. He brings the kingdom of God near with his presence, and bears witness to God's unbounded love. In the eyes of the powerful—he is dangerous.

The Pharisees know the danger isn't just for Jesus, but extends to the whole of Judea. The ones who've already warned Jesus that Herod seeks to kill him will give a last warning, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop."

Jesus replies—in words borrowed from the prophet Habakkuk—if the voices are silenced, the very stones will cry out (Habakkuk 2:11).

Herod the Great rebuilt Jerusalem into a Hellenistic city. Herod Antipas names his capital for Caesar Tiberius to court Roman favor. Religious leaders have been coopted to serve Rome's interests, keeping the people pliant under Roman occupation.

Jesus is passing judgment on those who hold power, while reminding the people of their ultimate allegiance—their allegiance to the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

We can see that the believers are swept away in celebration, while the Jewish authorities are swept away in fear. But, I wonder, what do we experience in this ancient parade?

I remember another WNBA championship game. It was *deja vu*. I was back in the Compaq Center, heart pounding with excitement, ears deafened by the cheering crowd, eyes fixed on the game, body poised for celebration, clock ticking slowly down to zero.

In a split-second finish there's a desperation shot, a final buzzer, and utter SILENCE. Opposing guard Theresa Witherspoon lofted a shot from beyond mid-court. Even as celebratory confetti began to drop from the rafters, the ball dropped through the hoop. Reality shifted before our eyes, and the championship we had just begun to celebrate faded into the outcome of a completely different game.

It was a feeling I'll never forget.

Beneath the joy of the Palm celebration is the knowledge that Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are coming.

The crowds around Jesus are singing the words to the Hallel Psalms. Luke clues us in with a single refrain, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." These are the Psalms (113-118) are part of the Passover Celebration. More importantly, they were the Psalms sung by the Levites as they sacrificed the Passover lambs.¹

Conqueror and king AND sacrifice. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord."

The joy of celebration fades into the reality of the week. In Jerusalem, the shouts and accolades will die away into stunned silence. Dreams of a conquering king crushed. The crowds whose mouths once spoke words of blessing soon will learn to cry out “Crucify!”

It is a tradition of the church—the palms from the previous year are saved and burned to ash for use in the Ash Wednesday Service. Having—at one time—nearly burned down my carport when putting the palms to flame, I’ve learned that the palms fronds we wave are volatile. Fresh and alive and glorious in the hands of believers, they quickly become a thing for flame and ash until all that remains is a cross.

Glory, Laud, Honor... and Ash.

On this Palm Sunday, we are invited to celebrate Jesus who conquers our hearts and redeems us body and souls. We are invited to celebrate the one who willingly follows God’s call without counting the cost.

Let us walk into the silence of the week to come, remembering our allegiance to the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and following the way of our Lord Jesus Christ—a way of humility and love. Amen.

¹ Lauterbach, Jacob Z. “Passover Sacrifice.” *Jewish Encyclopedia*. www.jewishencyclopedia.com. 11 April 2019.