

Rejoice, Confess, Lament
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At Cape May Presbyterian Church
Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday April 10, 2022
Based on Luke 19:28-42

In Luke's gospel, the center of the known world is Jerusalem. It's in this gospel that we see the baby Jesus taken to the Temple in that city and blessed by Anna and Simeon. It's in this gospel that we see the pre-teen Jesus lingering in Jerusalem to argue scripture with the rabbis, when his parents have already headed home. The adult Jesus has been headed toward Jerusalem for the last six chapters; because, as he asks back in chapter 13, "how can any prophet die outside of Jerusalem?" It's a sort of bitter joke. Jerusalem is a holy city; people go there to make sacrifices and worship at the Temple. But like most urban centers—like New York City, like Washington, DC, even like Philadelphia, Jerusalem has a reputation for hostility. Jesus knows from an early point in his ministry that he will be arrested and executed as a religious leader; and he knows that that clash of the spiritual and the violent has Jerusalem written all over it.

Today we celebrate with mixed emotions the moment when, after a lifetime of ministry in northern, rural Galilee, Jesus meets Jerusalem again as an adult, as a spiritual leader, the leader of a movement. The crowd around him is ready to welcome him. Some of them have come at least part of the way from Galilee with him; some of them may be citizens of the city, coming out to usher him in because they've heard of all that he is and has done. The gospel tells us "the whole multitude of the disciples"—apparently the whole crowd are honorary disciples at this point—"began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen." For everything he has done up to this point. It's as though the crowd were made up of everyone he has healed, everyone he has fed, everyone he has called and counseled, touched, included, and enlightened. They are all there, it seems, for Passover and for him, celebrating who he is, God's anointed. This is the moment when the man of God meets the city of God.

If you look over the passage again in your pew Bible, you may notice something missing—palms. Luke does not mention any leafy branches cut from the fields, as we hear about in Mark and in Matthew. In this gospel, the only thing people are throwing on to the road is their clothing. People are taking off their own clothes, their own outer cloak, pashmina, shawl, leaving them at least a little bit more exposed to dust and sun and wind. The whole scene, with its shedding of clothes reminds me of the story when young King David came dancing into Jerusalem nearly nude, celebrating the ark of the covenant's entry into the city, the presence of God there. Jesus' coming into Jerusalem also marks the presence of God there, in a different way, and like David dancing ahead of the ark, people are going ahead of Jesus, throwing their clothes on the road to make his path.

In both cases, it's a little crazy, it's a parade, a festival, a little bit of mob mentality going on. The crowd has thrown caution to the wind, they are shouting, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" No wonder the Pharisees want it to stop. You can't go around chanting that some guy from Nazareth is king when you live under the rule of the Roman emperor. And the Roman emperor certainly does not come in the name of the Lord.

The biblical scholar Marcus Borg pointed out that there would have been a Roman procession at the festival of Passover. Pilate would have ridden in on a great horse, surrounded by an armed guard, in order both to display the grandeur of Rome and to make clear to the crowds who had come in for Passover—remember who is in charge.

But the crowd that is paving the road for Jesus, Jesus who rides a unbroken colt rather than a great horse, they *have* forgotten who is in charge. They have forgotten Pilate and his armed guard; they have forgotten the looming power of Rome. The Pharisees have not forgotten—they may not like living in fear of Rome, but they do like living. They tell Jesus, make it stop. Especially, you'd better make them stop calling you a king, make them be quiet. Quiet is so much safer, the dispersal of crowds is so much less likely to lead to violence and Roman intervention. Make it stop. But Jesus essentially responds that he can't. "If they were silent, the stones themselves would shout," he says. There is no stopping this moment, this energy—it has to burst out, somehow, in loud chanting, in song.

What Jesus brings to the common people of Palestine, in his very being, in everything he does and says, what he brings is what, above all things, the Romans do not want this occupied people to have. Hope.

Remember that as Jesus enters the city it is almost Passover. The festival for which they are all in Jerusalem is the festival of the people's liberation from slavery, their physical salvation and their escape from a nation that was trying to wipe them out. Surely amid the chanting and the singing, they are hoping for, dreaming of, and even experiencing a political and social reversal, freedom for the slave and the debtor and the prisoner. This is the hope of the day, of the shouting, the hope we still feel—a better day is at hand, a different world has begun.

Sadly, the crowd is more hopeful than the man on the donkey. They rejoice that the power of his love has come to the center of power. But when Jesus catches sight of the city, he does not sing. He does not exult in his own transformative power. He does not even preach. He weeps. If only you understood peace, he laments. But you don't. The crowd is euphoric, drunk with the moment, but Jesus knows that the world is not remade with one morning's parade. Ahead of them lies the Roman garrison and the fear it inspires, the Temple hierarchy who cling to their old ways of surviving, a city where what is possible has seemed to shrink and harden with every passing year. I imagine that if Jesus were to stand overlooking Philadelphia, he might shed tears there as well.

What Jesus knows, that the crowd does not understand, is this: the kingdom of God is not accomplished in one joyous parade. To right the wrongs, to iron out the wrinkles of corruption and greed, to make the rough places plain, it will take more sacrifice and more work than the giving up of a pashmina. There will be betrayal and suffering and death, before we get to the Easter dawn.

The kingdom of God, having bloomed for a day on that road into Jerusalem, will seem to wilt and disappear within the day. Jesus, who seems on this day to have the power to lift up the downtrodden, will himself be crucified, dead, and buried.

But we always have this moment. Even through the valley of the shadow of death, we have this moment when we see the coming of the kingdom of God. A moment when we can feel and know what the kingdom is, and know that whatever it costs, however long the wait, there is a better way to be. A way of being where we each of us rejoice in each other's healing, we work for each other's freedom and well-being and celebrate every forward step. A way in which neither safety nor change demands that we pick up a gun or fasten a lock. The momentary glimpse of the better way that we get in Palm Sunday, may be enough to carry us through, through the broken human communities we see in Jerusalem, through the cross and the grave, the suffering and the uncertainty, all the way to Easter.