

Great Expectations
Luke 19:28-40
Rev. Don J. Best
Palm Sunday
Bethel Presbyterian Church
April 14, 2019

It is Palm Sunday, so our gospel reading is the story of Jesus, and his disciples, entering Jerusalem; this year from the gospel of Luke. It is the end of a long journey that began back in chapter 9. When Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus on the mountain top, "and were speaking about [Jesus'] departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." (9:31) The irony of this Palm Sunday reading from Luke, is that there is no mention of palm branches or tree branches of any kind. Listen now to our reading for today Luke, chapter 19, verses 28 through 40:

Gospel Reading

²⁸ After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

²⁹ When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰ 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. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'"

³² So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?"

³⁴ They said, "The Lord needs it."

³⁵ Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.

³⁶ As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ 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, ³⁸ saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop."

⁴⁰ He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon

It happens every four years. The election of a president of the United States of America. There is a long time when we learn about potential candidates. Then we are presented with two choices, and one day in October one candidate is chosen to be the president for the next four years. And immediately some number of people are disappointed, while others couldn't be happier. On Monday everyone is excited about the possibilities, and hopes for the future, and by Wednesday morning hope for many is lost. This is the nature of our current polarized political process.

On first reading, everything about this reading from Luke, speaks to the arrival of a new king. At least that is what everyone seems to be thinking. Jesus has been out on the campaign trail so to speak. He has been travelling the countryside preaching, teaching, healing, casting out demons, caring for the poor and the hungry, and lifting up the down trodden members of society; a real grassroots campaign to be the next king in Judea. And, now Jesus comes to Jerusalem with a real following of disciples. Not just the twelve chosen disciples, but a "whole multitude of disciples." A whole multitude of disciples shouting: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" But in just a few days, some of those disciples will be leaving Jerusalem lamenting, "but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel." But I am getting ahead of the story.

Luke tells the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in the style of many stories of the arrival of a conjuring hero or new king. Luke uses the scriptures of Israel to make his point. In the beginning of our reading, Jesus sent two disciples to retrieve a colt from the village. As Jesus rides into the city, it is reminiscent of Zechariah, chapter 9, verse 9: "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." Once again, as so often in the gospels, the actions of Jesus fulfill the ancient prophecies.

As the procession continues, people throw their clothing in the path of Jesus, and "the whole multitude of disciples," the people who have been following Jesus. The crowds of people who have witnessed the deeds of power that Jesus had done on his journey. All those without hope, who had placed their hope in the traveling rabbi from Nazareth, began shouting from Psalm 118, verse 26: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord," only Luke has them insert the word "king." Once again making it plain that this is a royal procession. And the people continue to shout, "Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" The people are calling for peace, as the Prince of Peace rides through the streets.

Then, a dissenting voice is heard, "Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." Many have theorized about the motive of the Pharisees; why they were concerned about the noise of the "multitude of disciples." It is possible they saw Jesus as a threat to their authority, but it is likely that they were concerned that the loud procession might attract the attention of the larger Roman presence during the Passover. Attention that could only spell trouble for the Jewish people. Whatever their motives, Jesus makes it clear that nothing can be done to silence the chorus of disciples. Jesus answered them with a reference to another ancient prophet, Habakkuk, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

It is plain in our reading that the people had great expectations for Jesus as a king, as a prophet, and as fulfilment of the promises of a Messiah. But, did they know what lay ahead for this King-Prophet-Messiah?

No doubt, some of them should have known; the ones to whom Jesus said: "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." But, on that day of entry there is no evidence that was on any of their minds.

We, on the other hand, know what is in front of Jesus. We know the treachery, the suffering, the rejection, and the denial that is coming for the King of Kings. And, yes, we know the glorious resurrection of Easter Sunday. As the Easter people of the Christian Church, we tend to approach Holy Week and Easter in one of two ways. Some of us, some churches, jump from the excitement of Palm Sunday to the Glory of Easter Morning. Jumping over the events of Holy Week: the lessons and commandments of Maundy Thursday, and the violence and loss of Good Friday. So much is lost in this Sunday to Sunday approach to Holy Week; from celebration to celebration.

But, some of us, who slow down and join in the emotions of the week. When we eat the meal with Jesus and feel the pain and loss in Pilate's court. When we are unable to take our eyes off Jesus on the cross; we can move ahead too quickly and lose the wonder and expectation of Palm Sunday. We know what is coming and dismiss the ideas that the Son of Man is arriving in Jerusalem, and miss the anticipation of the "multitude of disciples," who are cheering and singing praise to "the one, the king, who comes in the name of the Lord."

Whether we focus on the events of Holy Week, or if we jump to the empty tomb of Easter, we lose the expectation of Palm Sunday. We know what is coming, and don't stop to join the parade. We know what to expect from Jesus, and miss the joy of the crowd who witnessed the coming of a king. In that case I ask you, what do you expect of Jesus this day?

Jesus of Nazareth is riding into Jerusalem on the colt of a donkey. People are covering the road in front of him with their coats, and his closest disciples are walking beside and behind him waving to the crowds. We should pause here in the road from the Mount of Olives and watch with excitement, feel the anticipation of the possibilities of the days to come.

Wave your palms as the procession approaches!

Join in the expectation that God has sent the one who will redeem Israel and return them to the kingdom of God. Jesus is here and the multitude of disciples are shouting. Join in and joyfully cheer the Son of Man:

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"