

Palm Sunday meditations

1. Luke 19:29-38

What was this? A joyful parade? A protest march? A political statement? A challenge to religious leaders? Why did Jesus do this? So often in church we re-enact Palm Sunday with parades with children waving palms and shouting "Hosanna!" It sort of feels like we thought this was Jesus on the red carpet: a celebrity entry into the big city and a chance for everyone to see, admire and praise him.

Luke's gospel actually tells this story a bit differently. First of all, sorry, no palms. Second, the people shouting and participating were those who already followed Jesus and not a random crowd. That's not just the twelve, but the larger group of disciples who followed him, perhaps as many as a hundred that day, though probably less. This was a group of believers who wanted to let others know what they saw in their teacher. They were not shy about talking about Jesus, as we so often are, and they told of all the healings and miracles and feedings and showed others that they loved him. They were not afraid of offending someone by saying what they believed. They were not afraid of looking foolish.

So, in a way, it was a celebration, or maybe a rally, if you will, but it was also a provocation. In its way, a protest march. Unlike the Roman governor, Pilate, who rode into Jerusalem every time he visited on a white stallion with people throwing flowers at his feet, Jesus purposely chose a colt of a donkey, perhaps the lowliest mount imaginable. His disciples shouted "king," but he looked about as un-king-like as one could

imagine. So much so that Romans who saw him may have thought it was a joke, satire at best. And his disciples shouted: “peace in heaven,” which echoes the song of the angels at Jesus’ birth in Luke’s account, “Peace on earth, good will to all.”

On Palm Sunday, no one would have described the earth as peaceful, despite the Roman’s claiming a “Pax Romana.” His disciples may have been echoing the prayer Jesus gave them, where they prayed “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.” Peace in heaven come to earth in this one who is king with a small “k”, whose power rests not in centurions with swords and stallions, but in love. Yes, this was a protest march, all right, a statement about power and glory and where those things truly reside. When we wave our palms, whether in our homes or in a future palm procession when we are all together again, how might it feel different if we imagined what we do as a protest against the way the world praises and exerts its power?

2. Luke 19:39-42

I have attended many protest marches in my life. The feeling I remember after most of them is one of exuberance and hope. I will forever remember the 2017 Women’s March in New York City. I have often said I never felt safer or more surrounded with love in that city than I did that day with a half a million of my new best friends!

So, I can imagine the disciples, fresh from shouting out their praises and telling their stories to each other and anyone who would listen, feeling so excited in the big city.

And then. Full stop. Reality check. Some religious leaders confront Jesus and ask him to tell his disciples to shut up about “king,” about “glory,” about all the great stuff he did. “Don’t draw attention to yourself; you’re in Jerusalem now. We play the game differently here than in the sticks. The real power of the world is here.” What a smack in the face those disciples must have felt.

But then, Jesus responds with power, “if they were quiet, the stones under our feet would shout!” What self-assurance, what a statement of power! Yes, Jesus, you go!

But then, Jesus doesn’t follow that up with striding forth in audacity. Instead, he goes into a lament. What? Instead of rejoicing with his disciples, Jesus looks out over this sacred city, this thin place, this center of power and struggle for millennia, and he weeps. He speaks, as one commentator says, “of a vision of what could have been and of grief over its loss, of tough hope painfully releasing the object of its hope, of sorrow and anger mixed, of accepted loss but with energy enough to go on.” (Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*, p. 229). The leap from “palm parade” to reality check doesn’t happen at Jesus’ arrest or crucifixion, not on Thursday or Friday of Holy Week. Rather it happens in just a few moments right there on Palm Sunday in the streets of the city, when Jesus acknowledges that, whatever his hopes might have been at the start of his ministry in the Jordan with his cousin John, the deep failure of human beings to discern God in their midst and to listen and to change is very powerful indeed. That’s the power Jesus was truly up against, not Rome or the religious establishment. Those were small potatoes compared to the power of hate we still

know so well and have experienced again over the past couple of weeks in Atlanta and Boulder, the power we witness when we see children starving because of war in Yemen, the power we experienced when we saw a policeman's knee on George Floyd's neck, and yes, whenever hate or the desire to hurt enters even into our own hearts and minds. What the pastor George Webber once called "the mess of the world, the inhumanity of [humans], the seeming hopelessness of a divided world." That's the power Jesus was up against. That's why he wept over Jerusalem.

Here's the thing: Jesus knew all this before he set foot in Jerusalem. Before he got on that donkey. Before he was baptized in the Jordan. And yet he still got on that donkey and came into the city. He did not flee from the pain and loss and hate. With the same kind of resolution we saw, say, in Martin Luther King, Jr. and his companions at the bridge in Selma or Mother Teresa in the slums of Calcutta, or a million other people faced with smaller evils who simply keep going, Jesus walked into Jerusalem.

And so, we journey. That's how we move into Holy Week, not leaping blithely from a parade singing Hosanna and waving palms to another service shouting "Christ is risen!" and hunting Easter eggs. Rather let us take time this week to face the pain of the remembrance of Jesus' final week on earth, because that pain is still with us, as is the one who walked through it for and with us and still does. Amen.