

“Who We are Becoming in Christ”

Luke 19:28-40

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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. Now as he was 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.”

Sixty years ago on Palm Sunday, this congregation worshiped in this sanctuary for the first time.

Christ Presbyterian Church spent more than a century on the Square, across from the State Capitol, right in the heart of power in this city and state.

Legend has it that, in those years, the coffee break destination of choice for many state representatives was none other than—Christ Pres.

From there on the Square, Christ Pres was a short walk up Bascom Hill to the University. In fact, the first president of the University of Wisconsin Madison was an early member of Christ Presbyterian Church.

For more than one hundred years, this congregation held a position of some prominence in this city.

And, sixty years ago, we gave it up—on purpose.

Not everyone thought this was a good idea. Some elders warned that the church would lose its significant influence, should it move further away from the heart of political power.

Sixty years later, it's clear that in many ways, they were right. Moving off the square and into the Tenney-Lapham neighborhood changed this congregation and the nature of its influence. But, in my estimation, there were some ways in which that move changed us and our public witness for the better.

How? Well, from here, on the shores of Lake Mendota, gazing back at the center of power, we see things we never saw when we were in the middle of it all. We know Jesus in a way we didn't know him there.

You see, Jesus most often stood on the edges and margins of life.

Take for example, that first Palm Sunday. Jesus stood on the Mount of Olives and gazed down at the city of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was the heart of political, religious, and social power in Jesus's time, and it had been so for thousands of years.

Jerusalem was the city of David, the home of the Temple Mount, the place where the prophets said God—God's very self—would dwell.

Gazing down at Jerusalem, Jesus could see all of Jerusalem's grandeur and beauty and possibility. He could also see its incredible problems.

A military occupation. Economic exploitation. Political violence. Religious corruption. Racial segregation. Gender discrimination. Kids caught in the middle of very adult problems.

The gospels say that before Jesus entered Jerusalem, he wept and cried, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, if only you knew the things that made for peace."

There are things you can see when you're not planted in the center of political power. And Jesus spent most of his life with people on the outside looking in.

Now that our congregation has spent a significant chapter of our life together doing the same, we see things our ancestors in faith didn't see so clearly. We more readily join Jesus in weeping for our city and for our country, "If only we knew the things that made for peace."

And, it's why, I believe, all these years later, we still join Jesus in his Palm Sunday parade.

It's easy to forget why we celebrate this odd festival. Or perhaps you're new to church and you're thinking, "Yeah, I have no earthly idea why I'm holding a palm on April 1st in Wisconsin. It snowed yesterday."

I get it. Church can be strange. Let me see if I can help paint the picture:

When Jesus first rode down what we now call the Palm Sunday road, Jesus saddles a donkey.

People wave palms. Actually, Luke doesn't actually mention any palms. The gospel according to John does.

His disciples hail him King.

And, this is confusing to a lot of people.

Because, Jesus hadn't won a battle. There's no coronation awaiting him in Jerusalem.

Pharisees, religious leaders in the center of power, tell the disciples to stop shouting. Jesus tells them not to bother. If they stop shouting, the stones would cry out.

But why?

It seems that what Jesus and his disciples were up to was one part prophetic act, one part performance art, one part parade, and one part protest.

Let's dig a little deeper, shall we? To understand Palm Sunday, we have to understand something of the Hebrew scriptures and Jewish faith tradition.

On that first Palm Sunday, people gathered in Jerusalem—not to wave palms, but to celebrate the Passover.

Passover commemorates what is arguably the single-most important event in Jewish history—God's rescue of the Hebrew children from slavery in Egypt.

To celebrate the Passover was and is to make a declaration of faith: that God cares about human suffering and actively works to liberate people from violence and oppression.

So, when Jesus gathered with his disciples on the Mount of Olives, they did so as an act of faith, to declare that just as God heard the cries of enslaved Hebrew children and helped them find a way to freedom, God heard their cries and would help them find a way to freedom, too.

Jesus and his disciples weren't the only ones who did this.

People gathered all over Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. And, on the same day that Jesus led his disciples in a procession down the Palm Sunday road, there was another parade heading into the city.

From the west, Roman authorities marched into Jerusalem to keep order, to ensure that this Passover celebration didn't get too out of hand. Remember, this festival was about freedom, and Jewish Palestine was occupied by the Roman Empire. Jewish political action groups often staged violent uprisings during the Passover festival.

So, that day, Roman soldiers and authorities marched into the western gates in full military regalia, with spears and swords, ready to "keep the peace" by force. And inevitably, somewhere across town, there were some Jewish people gathering with swords plotting when to stage their violent resistance, because for them, there could be no peace without freedom.

Meanwhile, to the east, looking down on the city from the Mount of Olives, Jesus mounted a donkey. His disciples stood near.

And I'm pretty confident that those disciples did not assume that Jesus was riding into Jerusalem to overtake the army coming from the west, unseat Pilate and Herod, and install himself in power.

Jesus carried no sword or spear. He never had.

Nevertheless, I do think Jesus's closest followers knew that when Jesus got on that donkey, the world as it was—was about to change.

Five hundred years before, the prophet Zechariah said that the Messiah, God's anointed one, would come to Jerusalem riding on the foal of a donkey—just as Solomon, David's son, had done when he went to Gihon to be crowned king.

In the ancient world, kings rode donkeys when they triumphantly entered conquered cities. A king riding a donkey—instead of a warhorse—into a city was a sign that the battle had been won. There was no more fight left to fight. It was a signal to the people of a city to welcome their new king, so that they could live in peace.

So, what do you think it meant that Jesus mounted a donkey to ride into Jerusalem and his disciples hailed him king?

Jesus hadn't won a battle against any human army. He'd never picked up a weapon against anyone.

And it didn't seem likely he would defend any of his disciples or subjects, should a competing king come to challenge him.

It was a puzzling scene then, as it is now.

But the puzzle of it all, the confounding display of peace and voluntary allegiance, was actually the point—the prophetic act, the performance art—that Jesus and his disciples put on display.

What was the first Palm Sunday? It was a demonstration that Jesus was the Messiah—just not exactly the one many people had been looking for.

In some ways, Jesus was the spitting image of the Messiah whom Zechariah said would come. He rode on the foal of a donkey and led his disciples to Jerusalem. Jesus had raised people from the dead, healed the sick, forgave sins, and turned people back to God.

The Messiah was supposed to do all of these things.

But the Messiah was also supposed to unseat foreign kings and restore Israel to Jewish rule. Many prophets said the Messiah would vanquish Israel's enemies and become rich from the spoils of war.

In these ways, Jesus didn't fit the bill.

The Jesus who sent disciples on missions along dangerous roads without money or sword wouldn't go on to overthrow the Roman government.

The Jesus who sat with the Samaritan woman at the well wouldn't harm people who were racially or religiously "other" in order to reinstate a Jewish nation.

The Jesus who rebuffed Satan for asking him to put God to the test, wouldn't tolerate a disciple cutting off the ear of a soldier in hopes of saving his life.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus and his disciples demonstrated that Jesus was not exactly the King they'd been waiting for, but he was God's Messiah and he would bring freedom.

It's just that Jesus would bring freedom not only to their tribe, but to the whole world.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus and his disciples demonstrated that prophets like Zechariah had been right—in part. Zechariah had seen a messianic vision of Jewish children playing safely in peace in the plazas of Jerusalem.

But Jesus the Messiah saw more: He saw his Jewish nieces and nephews joined by the Samaritan woman's daughter, the Roman Centurion's son, and the Ethiopian eunuch—all living in peace and growing into old age together.

Some of the Hebrew scriptures had said the Messiah would inaugurate a new world order, one in which Israel would reign in power over other nations.

But Jesus the Messiah saw a loving and inclusive world, a sanctuary for all to live in peace and freedom together.

The first Palm Sunday was a prophetic, performance art protest parade and it was an act of faith. Riding and marching into Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples declared a new version of that first Passover affirmation: the God who led the Hebrew people to freedom will lead all the peoples of the world to freedom, and God would do it all without violence.

For any who cheered Jesus on the donkey, some of the hopes of ancient days had to die. Dreams of conquest and control, certainty, exclusivity and superiority—they had no place in a Messianic march to a future where all could live in peace and freedom.

And the same is true for any of us who cheer on Jesus today—some of the hopes of ancient days yet have to die.

The good news for us is that we have some experience in letting go of the world we've inherited in favor of welcoming the world God intends for us.

Because this church moved from the center of power on the Square to this beautiful lot on the shores of Lake Mendota, we—subtly, and slowly, perhaps—have begun to give up some of those same things that early followers of Jesus had to relinquish: control, certainty, exclusivity, superiority. You've seen them begun to melt away, haven't you?

And what we've gained, of course, is a little more perspective and a little more freedom, along our journey with the Prince of Peace.

If it weren't so, do you imagine that in the summer of 2020, elders and leaders of this congregation would have joined demonstrations protesting the violent murder of George Floyd?

If it weren't so, do you imagine that in the decade before, this congregation would have established a Community Immigration Law Center to support the cases of asylum seekers, regardless of how they entered this country?

If it weren't so, do you imagine that today, we'd be a church standing alongside our Trans youth, elders, and staff, asking our elected officials to stop the barrage of bills that threaten to take away the essential medical care they count on for health and wholeness?

These are the actions of a people who've stood with Jesus outside of the city and wept with him, "Will we ever know the things that make for peace?"

Today, the Palm Sunday parade continues and calls out to any who want to join Jesus the Christ on a long walk to freedom.

And, I can't tell you why you might be inclined to join the Palm Sunday parade today, but I can tell you why I will.

I join the Palm Sunday parade because I don't think anyone but God has figured out how to lead us out of the social-political mess we're in.

I join the Palm Sunday parade because we live in a culture obsessed with violence and our children are dying. And I don't think that the people with weapons lined up to march into the halls of power are the ones who can save our children. But I think that following the Prince of Peace, we can.

I join the Palm Sunday parade because we live in a nation still plagued by the sin of racism and the delusion of white supremacy. I don't buy into the myths that people of one race are smarter or better equipped to lead or govern. I want to follow Jesus into a future where people of all races and religions are free and equal.

I join the Palm Sunday parade because I've watched generations before me join it and follow Jesus to freedom, and I want to get there, too.

Friends, the Palm Sunday parade began a long, long time ago, but it marches on today. Across the world this morning, millions join its number to walk beside the prince of peace.

And you are invited to come and join it too, singing Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest.