

Palm Sunday
April 10th, 2022

Luke 19:28-40 “The Risks of Being a Public Figure”

We've been in the gospel of Luke for most of Lenten Season except for last week when we took a detour in John's gospel. I believe I said, “Next week we'll be back in Luke for Palm Sunday.” And here we are. Anybody hear the word “palm” in this morning's reading? Me neither. Of the four gospels that give us the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem for the last time Luke is the only one who *doesn't* mention people waving branches and laying them on the road. Cloaks and garments yes, but no branches. And yet here we are waving palms on a Palm Sunday where there's no mention of palms. Here's another piece of Palm Sunday trivia for you. John's gospel is the only one that distinguishes the branches as *palm* branches. So technically, we should only wave palms on years where John is the gospel reading. Since this is a Luke year, I thought about having “Cloak Sunday” where instead of marching in with palm branches we could wave our coats around and lay them in front of the table. But as I've often said, I like my job so I decided that wouldn't be such a great idea. This year. We've got three years before we get Luke's gospel again.

While we're talking about not-so-great ideas, let's take a look at our scripture this morning and unpack what's going on here. It's easy to look at this story and go with the traditional, "Jesus started the week by entering the city to the crowds cheering 'Hosanna!' but ended the week in front of a crowd who shouted, 'Crucify him!'" Honestly that's a reliable tried-and-true way to start Holy week and I'm sure I've used this before. But I've been in a Bible study mood lately which means I've been digging deeper into what's below the surface of these stories. And the more I dug into this one, the more I saw what a dangerous situation Jesus was walking into.

Sometimes we get the notion that this was a low-key event that, if it happened today, wouldn't even show up in our newsfeed. Or it would be buried somewhere in the back of our local newspaper. Why would there be *any* journalists on the scene if this was just a small spontaneous gathering of people at the back gate of Jerusalem? It's much more likely that they would be at the front entrance waiting for the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate to come to Jerusalem to monitor the Passover celebration. What Jesus did wasn't a small, insignificant event though. Now to be sure, it wasn't the kind of spectacle like Pilate entering the front gates of Jerusalem, but it wasn't just a little flash-mob event that Jesus' disciples did on a whim. This took planning.

Last Monday was the 54th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. which got me thinking about the Civil Rights Movement. One of the things we often fail to recognize about the civil rights movement is how organized it was. But when schools teach kids about Rosa Parks, it's often presented in a way that gives the impression she was some random Black lady on a bus who was just tired and sat where she wanted to. Then when the bus driver told her to go to the back of the bus to make room for white passengers, she refused and thus the American Civil Rights movement was born. I suppose that's a fine introductory story for grade school-age kids, but the reality is that Rosa Parks was an activist with hundreds of hours of training in non-violent civil disobedience under her belt long before the incident on that bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She was not the first person to resist bus segregation, but the NAACP believed she had the best case to challenge Alabama's segregation laws. The point is that sometimes things that seem like they randomly happen are actually part of a larger plan.

Most scholars believe this was the case when Jesus made his final entry into Jerusalem. This event took some planning. First of all, Jesus had just been in Jericho where he was preaching and teaching to a large crowd. How large was the crowd? Large enough that a man named Zacchaeus had to climb a tree to see Jesus as he passed by. Then Jesus moved ahead of the crowds toward

Jerusalem. He stopped about 2 miles outside of Jerusalem near a little town called Bethphage. That's where he sent two of his disciples to a very specific location with very specific instructions. They were to untie a colt that had never been ridden and tell the owners that "the Lord needs it." To me, that has "pre-planned objective" written all over it. I know we want to believe that somehow Jesus had divine foreknowledge that there just happen to be a colt that was tied up at the right time and place and that his disciples just randomly untied it while the bewildered owners said, "Hey, what are you doing with our colt?!" "The Lord needs it!" "Oh, well if that's the case then steal away." And like Rosa Parks, that makes for a great story. "See? This proves that Jesus was the Messiah! His miraculous knowledge of the colt confirms it!" The more likely scenario is that this was part of a larger plan and that the owners already knew ahead of time that two of Jesus' disciples would come to get their colt.

Then the disciples brought this colt who had never been ridden before to Jesus. They placed cloaks on it's back to serve a makeshift saddle and they proceeded to the gates of Jerusalem where "the whole multitude of disciples" met him. If Jesus had gone ahead of the crowds to get the colt, how did the crowd know he was going to be at the back gate to Jerusalem? They didn't have cell phones back then. They had to know ahead of time where to be and what to do. What did they do? They spread their

cloaks on the road and greeted him with cheers and said, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!” The symbolism here seems deliberate too. Everyone there would have known about how the Roman Governor Pilate typically entered the city from the front gate in full military regalia riding a highly trained armored horse with a crowd of people cheering “Hail Caesar.” And here at the back gate was un-armored Jesus on an un-trained, un-armored colt that hadn’t even been ridden before with a crowd of people making a path with their clothes and hailing him as King.

There were Pharisees there among the crowd who said, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop!” I always assume Pharisees automatically mean, “corrupt religious leaders,” but I’ve had to re-think this notion lately. We don’t know their motivation for saying this but remember a few weeks ago when we were in Luke 13 there were some Pharisees who kept warning Jesus that his actions were going to get him killed. The Pharisees that were at the city gates were already part of the crowd so there’s the possibility that they were supporters warning him to stop what he was doing because they knew the council of corrupt religious leaders who were in cahoots with the Roman authorities would put him to death if he kept allowing his disciples to call him King. But Jesus said, “Listen, even if I could silence them the stones would

shout out.” In other words, it’s too late to stop this train. The plan must go on. Jesus knew there was a risk that he could be tried and executed for what he was doing.

It was in the same way that Rosa Parks knew the dangers of resisting when the bus driver told her to move to the back of the bus. It was in the same way that Martin Luther King Jr. knew the risks of showing up to Memphis, Tennessee to support a sanitation worker’s strike. He surely knew that at any time he might be killed for his cause. And he was. King was a minister of the gospel and I believe this is why he took these risks time after time throughout his mission. Yes, it was for the sake of Civil Rights but it was also for the sake of Christ. And I know there must have been people in Memphis who, like the Pharisees at the back gate to Jerusalem, warned King to stop what he was doing because he might be killed. “You should tell your followers to keep quiet and quit rocking the boat. There are people in power who are afraid of what you stand for and what you’re working toward. They want to silence you.”

Here's the question I want to put on the table this morning. Who wants to silence us? In our scripture today, the disciples were making so much noise that there were devout traditional religious people in the crowd who wanted Jesus to keep things quiet. They feared reprisal from the powers that be who perceived Jesus as a threat. I

think it's important for the church to ask, "Who is fearful of us?" This isn't to say that we need to be loud for the sake of being loud, but if no one hears our message ... if no one hears of our service ... if no one hears our challenge to the powers and principalities of this fragmented world then what's the point? Jesus' message upset the status quo in the first century and it should very well upset the status quo today because there isn't much difference between what was happening then and what is happening now.

Palm Sunday, if we must call it that, did not happen with Jesus alone. It happened because the disciples were faithful. They carried out Jesus' orders, but they also helped him carry out his plan. They got the horse. They put him on it. They cheered him on when he entered the city. They praised him "for all the great things they had seen." They might not have completely understood it, but they knew they were bearing witness to something special. They cheered for this King - not because he was going to come and conquer the Romans in the way the Romans conquered others - but because he was there to usher in God's reign of peace and justice. Some wished Jesus and his followers would just be quiet, but in the end, they could not be silenced. What are you doing ... what are *we* doing that would cause others to want to silence us? What are we doing that would cause us to not be

silenced? This is a question that we must ask as we begin holy week and follow Jesus on his path to the cross.