

Palm Sunday C 2022 Luke 19:28-40

I did some continuing education in adaptive leadership, prior to the pandemic, and the psychologist who was leading this particular training used a couple of what we might call tricks to show us that we can become so focused on one aspect of a task or on trying to measure one specific outcome that we don't even see other issues or events, even when they're significant and right in front of us. It's easy to miss the full picture when we've been trained, taught, or just gotten used to looking for what we already expect or think we know. So, did you notice that in today's Palm Sunday gospel, there are no palms? Of the four gospel writers, only John mentions the crowds adorning Jesus' parade route with branches broken off of palm trees. This story, and the chapters that come after it that we will consider all throughout this holy week, are a study in God confounding our expectations.

By this point in the gospel we have seen many characters confused, surprised, or in awe of Jesus—who he seems to be and what he has done. From staying behind in the temple at the age of 12 to study with the elders, to calling Lazarus out of the grave, Jesus shocks even those closest to him. Yet most of the people who identify him as the Messiah still operate as though he will conform to their pre-conceived notions of what God's Messiah should be—that is, a powerful military and political figure who will rescue them from Roman oppression. Individuals have experienced Jesus liberating them from sin, death, and the consequences of broken human community; but when the crowds come together, they chant for a king who is going to fix their very practical problems—their economy and their government. So they treat Jesus like any other ancient near eastern hero, marking the final steps of his journey into Jerusalem with a parade. In fact, you can just imagine that while this scene is happening on the east side of Jerusalem, that on the west side of the city, Pilate is parading into town, flanked by Roman soldiers, displaying the wealth and power of the occupying government.

But Jesus is not just another Pilate, not just another powerful personality who—after all his teaching about loving enemies—is going to suddenly transform into a bigger, better version of the corrupt leaders the people already know—commanding a bigger army and winning a decisive victory to become a more powerful ruler than the ones sent by Rome. Jesus is entirely different. He arrives not in a chariot or on a charging steed, but on a colt (in Luke's version, as opposed to Matthew and John's donkey). There is no official fancy welcome, no advance team clearing the way or red carpet rolled out, no military parade; only the people themselves taking off their cloaks to pave his way. And of course, Jesus knows what the people do not yet know;

this procession into Jerusalem with the joyful praise of the crowds is not the true triumphant journey. The real triumph will happen at the end of the week, when Jesus walks out of town, carrying the cross.

It takes just those few short days for the crowds to realize that Jesus is not the Messiah that they want, and to turn on him for what they surely considered a betrayal. But Jesus never wavered from his mission—which was not to become a sacrifice to appease an angry God, but was to live out God’s loving will perfectly, instead of returning hate for hate or violence for violence, not even to save his own life. The crowds missed who Jesus really was, even though he had been trying to show them all along. Even the disciples missed who Jesus really was, although he had warned them explicitly about what would happen to him. Jesus doesn’t live up to anybody’s expectations of what the Messiah should be; he couldn’t, because human expectations aren’t big enough to encompass the endless love of God.

Reading through scripture, we like to think that we’d have been so much more enlightened and would have behaved so much better than the Israelites who whined in the wilderness, or the heretical kings who ignored the prophets, or the Pharisees who conspired against Jesus, or the crowds who were so easily swayed first for Jesus then against him. But as we make our way through this week, watching a Lord who washes feet, who feeds a traitor mere hours before his betrayal, and who doesn’t call on the angels to intervene at the crucifixion—since, after all, the rest of us don’t get to ease our suffering with supernatural intervention—as we watch each of these familiar events play out in our worship services this week, let us remember that even though we already know the story, everything that Jesus did was unexpected. Knowing how the story ends may lull us into thinking that we would do better than those who betrayed, denied, and killed Jesus. But we are not the good guys in these stories. Each step that Jesus takes in this week of his passion is a step toward God’s unending love and a step away from self-centered human instinct, our instinct, for self-perseveration at all costs.

This week we Christians are witnesses to a story of radical, unexpected love. This is the story that we are compelled to share with the world—that God, who confounds our limits and expectations in every way—loved us to hell and back. We can choose not to share that story, or to turn away from the part that we play in it, or to pretend that it doesn’t challenge everything we know, or to soften it, tame it, or keep it at arms length as history or tradition. We can choose to be silent, but God’s radical love is still so great, even the stones will shout it out.