

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
April 10, 2022 – Palm Sunday
Luke 19: 28-40 – “I’ll Welcome You, My Lord”

This morning we remember the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, an entry made significant and notable by the events that would happen in the holy city that week. But remember back with me for a moment to Christmas Eve, just a few months ago, when we celebrated Christ’s birth, Christ’s coming into the world. And if you remember, I talked about how the gospel writers say something about who this Christ is by the details. I talked of the four rooms of an ancient Israelite home, how Christ is born in the stable of the home with the animals raised to be a sacrifice, to be offered as a sacrifice for the house on behalf of the house. Even as the angels and shepherds and magi honored his birth, his role as redeeming sacrifice is foreshadowed. It is the kind of detail that would be shrugged at or dismissed if not for the retrospect that holy week gives.

You see, from Christ’s birth, there is this dynamic going on. On one hand, Christ is tapping into the messianic hopes and expectations that God would visit Israel with a savior. But on the other hand, the onlookers and disciples alike are unaware of the full scope and nature of the salvation Christ would bring or how he would go about it.

So when Jesus comes into Jerusalem in this symbolic fashion, igniting those messianic hopes, unbeknownst to those who honored his entry, he is setting in motion certain things. The Pharisees wish to keep things peaceable and under the radar. They know the Romans get antsy at Passover time while large numbers of pilgrims fill the city. So these Pharisees ask Jesus to quiet the crowd and direct the crowd to act in less provocative ways. When they see the people applying the prophecies and hopes of their traditions to Jesus, and they see the crowd engage in these symbolic actions that Rome might interpret as subversive or seditious acts, the Pharisees implore Jesus to stop it.

But despite the Pharisees practical concerns and wise advice, according to Luke’s gospel, Jesus instructs his disciples to do things that would intentionally invoke those hopes and expectations and attract the attention of those in power. He instructs them to conscript the use of a donkey, as would be done for a king or political figure. He rides on a donkey rather than walking; he comes in symbolically rather than uneventfully. The prophet Zechariah had spoken these words of expectation about a coming ruler:

9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
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.

Jesus egged them on, we could say. He fanned those hopes and expectations. He stirred the frustrations with Rome and the hopes that God would send help. The jubilant celebration gains its energy and force from the years of hoping and anticipating.

I think of Langston Hughes poem, A Dream Deferred. He writes:

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

One possibility for a hope deferred, as Hughes suggests, is that the pent-up energy explodes. Luke writes, “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.” They sing and shout hosanna, Save us. They wave palm branches and lay down their cloaks in symbolic actions, honoring this one riding into Jerusalem.

Jesus triggers the crowd and their response, even though they are not aware of the role they are playing. For Jesus is setting in motion a chain of events that they do not perceive. They are not cognizant of what it is this week would bring. They are not aware of the type and scope of the salvation Jesus came to bring. They want political victory. Jesus is seeking a more penetrating victory over sin and death.

Jesus must have known they would be set up for disappointment, their expectations being for something that Jesus would not be. He must have known that their parade welcoming him into Jerusalem would do more to mark him before the authorities

than anything Judas would do in the Garden of Gethsemane. For while their hopes were ignited, they were playing a role they were not aware of, setting in motion the chain of events that would lead Jesus to the cross.

Now the gospels do tell us of instances where Jesus had tried to speak about what would come, about what had to be, like when he told Peter and a small group that he would suffer and die. But they did not understand, and Peter rebuked Jesus saying “may it never be.” He tells Jesus to stop talking like that. The signs were there, but the disciples and crowds were not ready to perceive them. It will only be in retrospect.

They follow and extol Jesus as Lord, and they are right to do so. And they sing and honor him, and they are right to do so. And many continue to follow after that harrowing week, deepening their love and their reverence for the saving sacrifice offered.

It makes me wonder what else we don’t get. We extol Christ yet again on this Palm Sunday. We wave the palms, and if Christ were to ride in again, we might lay down our cloaks in honor. But what work does he have in mind for our hearts that we do not yet perceive? What saving and redeeming narrative does he envision for us that we are not yet aware of? For Christ sees the fuller picture, and while our hopes and expectations and satisfactions cause us to sing and praise the God who saves, our vision and understanding are limited.

This recognition might cause us to sing and praise with humility and openness. I believe, help my unbelief. I welcome you, but help me to know how to welcome you aright. I offer my life to you, but teach me what you want to do in and through me. I have received your saving grace, but may that grace do its full work in my heart and in my life.

What, O Lord, are you trying to teach me? What is the work you are doing that I cannot fully perceive? What saving work do you still want to do in my heart? Lead me and teach me to follow, for you only know the way.

So as we enter this holy week, no matter how many times you have entered it in the past, I wonder if we could enter it with openness and humility, offering our praises and seeking what we need to learn. What work does Christ need to do in our hearts? What change and growth is he seeking that we have not yet perceived? And how might we emerge changed and more fully redeemed?

So while we welcome you, O Christ, we will not tell you your work. Say what you need to say. Do what you need to do. Teach us, redeem us, and we will follow.

And all God's people said...

Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

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."

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

¹ O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever!

² Let Israel say,
“His steadfast love endures forever.”

¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the Lord.

²⁰ This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.

²¹ I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.

²² The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.

²³ This is the Lord’s doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴ This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

²⁵ Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!
O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

²⁶ Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
We bless you from the house of the Lord.

²⁷ The Lord is God,
and he has given us light.
Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.

²⁸ You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.

²⁹ O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.