



Palm Sunday

FALSE PEACE

LUKE 19:28-40

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A few years ago, a minister friend of mine was preaching a sermon for the Sunday following Christmas, using the Bible text that tells the story of how Jesus' father Joseph loaded Mary and the baby onto the back of a donkey and escaped hostile Judea. It's a satisfying but bittersweet ending to a dark story; they are running, after all, to escape the bloodshed that an angry and fearful King Herod has caused to happen. We call this story the "flight into Egypt" because that is precisely what the little family does: they flee to Egypt, the infant Saviour of the world borne away by donkey to safety.

My friend decided to preach this story in character, which is a wonderful way to bring a new perspective to a familiar story; he nearly brought the house down, though, when we realized he was preaching in character as the donkey. It was brilliantly done.

Although we do find ourselves with another donkey in this particular Palm Sunday tale, yet again bearing the Saviour of the world, I think he was probably a very young donkey, and perhaps too short to see much of what was happening around him. So we're going to stick with two human perspectives on this extraordinary story.

It's a well-known truth that two people can be eye-witnesses to the same events and describe them completely differently; and that is exactly what happens today. The disciples and the pharisees both see Jesus' coming on a donkey; but they understand and experience it in polar opposite ways. In the timeline of Jesus' final days, we have jumped back nearly a week to this entry into Jerusalem. The last couple of Sundays have been about Jesus' words and teachings, that last long evening with his friends, just the day before his death; Palm Sunday, as we call it, takes place before all that.

Jesus heads toward Jerusalem from the direction of his friend's home, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, sending a couple of his disciples to collect a donkey colt for him to ride into the city on. And as Jesus comes, the palm branches begin to be waved and strewn on the road, garments are flung about. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" These words are shouted by a multitude of disciples as Jesus rides his little donkey into the great walled city of Jerusalem.

But this great crowd of Jesus' friends and followers are not the first multitude to shout joyfully and proclaim Jesus' mission and ministry in the world. The praises shouted by this multitude of disciples strongly echo the praises first proclaimed by another multitude: the angels at Jesus' birth: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!"

These are not empty words; it's not just noise or cheering. The people are compelled to shout these praises because of all that they have witnessed at Christ's hands: the miracles, the teachings, the love and power of God embodied in their midst. These last three years of Jesus' ministry among them...how many of them witnessed first-hand Christ's works of peace? How many of them have found physical, mental, spiritual, communal peace by his healing and teachings? How many heard the witness of others and have joined the crowd in the hope of being part of this peace?

I particularly love what Luke, the gospel-writer, has done here, giving us this callback to the night of Jesus' birth; because it reminds us that what God promised through the praises of the angels, Jesus has already delivered. The multitude of disciples are praising Jesus because of what Jesus has clearly done during his short time on earth. They are full of joy and hope because this heavenly peace and glory is here on earth in the person of Jesus Christ.

Let's digress for just a moment and remind ourselves what this heavenly peace and glory are, that this multitude of Christ's followers are so joyfully praising. The peace of Christ runs deeper than a calm and chill sort of mood, or a day without an argument. Those are more like symptoms of peace than peace itself. Theologian Cornelius Plantinga beautifully describes this kind of peace as the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight. This kind of peace means universal flourishing, wholeness and deep happiness – a rich state of affairs in which our natural needs are satisfied and our natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Saviour opens doors and welcomes us in. Peace, in other words, is the way things ought to be.

And divine glory is the going-public of God's holiness. It is the way God puts his holiness on display for people to see and recognize. So, the glory of God is the holiness of God made manifest; here, that glory is made manifest in Jesus: what he has done during his ministry, and - unbeknownst to the multitude praising him - what he will do on Good Friday and on Easter morning.

It seems to me that we're witnessing yet again in the Gospel of Luke one of those times where what is true and beautiful and good is so enrapturing in the moment that people cannot help but give voice to the joy it calls forth within them.

Remember in Luke chapter 4 when the people are first amazed, in a positively "can't help themselves" sort of way, at hearing Jesus preach for first time...and then how things go awry as they consider the personal cost and ramifications?

Jesus proclaimed that he had come to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. Everyone was thrilled and marvelling at first, but by the end of the conversation, they were full of rage and trying to chase Jesus over a cliff. The same thing is soon going to happen again, and praises will turn to demands for Jesus' death. What will come after Jesus enters Jerusalem will confound the people and their view of the way to everlasting peace on earth.

For now, the multitude of disciples is swept up in the glory and majesty of Christ; but we see this post-emotional high "come down" happen almost immediately with the Pharisees. As soon as they hear the multitude praising Jesus, feting him as their new king, the Pharisees tell Jesus to tell the people to be quiet.

Let's switch perspectives now, and look upon the events of Palm Sunday from the position of our second group of eye-witnesses: the Pharisees.

This crowd of boisterous, loud people - men, women and children - this crowd is dangerous. Not in and of themselves, especially. But civil unrest - even hinting at over-turning the current Jewish power structure, shouting about setting a new king on Judea's throne - the Roman Empire is not going to like that. Jesus and his band of civil agitators are risking the safety and the peace, fragile as it is, between Judea and its Roman conquerors.

At this point in history, the relationship between the local Jewish and Roman government officials worked, and a delicate peace was holding, as long as the Jews didn't rock the boat. The concerns that the Pharisees have are real concerns, ones that we would probably share in a similar situation in our own city today, if a large, shouting mob marched in, proclaiming that their leader would be our new leader, too.

This triumphal entry is re-told in all four gospels in the Bible - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - and in all four gospels Jesus enters the city with his multitude of disciples. But what Jesus does after that differs a little among all four accounts.

In one of the gospels, Jesus just looks around and leaves - probably to the great relief of the Pharisees; peace, it would seem, would be maintained that day. In another Gospel, Jesus and his disciples all wander around a bit, and some Greeks - foreign visitors - come up and talk to Jesus. Again, worrying, but not too likely to cause further trouble.

But in two of the gospels, Jesus must really scare the daylights out of the Jewish leaders, making them feel like it's only a matter of days before Rome turns this into a political crisis or worse. In those gospels, Jesus and his crowd of protestors march right into the Temple itself, turning over tables, driving out the people working there, even proclaiming the imminent destruction of Jerusalem itself.

Can you imagine how afraid the Pharisees and the Jewish leaders must have been, that their peace with Rome would fall apart? That stricter, more oppressive rules would be imposed upon them, that war would come?

This is not poetic license on my part, in case you were wondering; in the gospel of John, for example, after Lazarus was raised from the dead, the gospel writer reports a conversation among the Jewish leaders: 'So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man [Jesus] is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation."

Peace between Rome and Judea would soon breakdown, not very many decades after Jesus' death and resurrection. And the war that followed was bloody and devastating. That kind of conflict against a much stronger and better supplied enemy is not to be taken lightly. They were not wrong to be worried and afraid; and yet, at the same time, they absolutely were wrong, too.

By reminding us so deliberately of Jesus' birth in the words of the multitude, Luke the gospel-writer draws out one of the most important take-aways of the Palm Sunday story: God is directing what is happening. Very easy to see at Christmas; harder and harder to see in the years that followed, at least until Easter morning.

From Jesus' birth to the Cross, God is not susceptible to fate or chance, God in Christ does not suffer by accident or unwillingly, and God redeems all things into his purposes. What's happening is part of God's plan.

The fact that this is God's plan is beautifully revealed through all of the instructions that Jesus gives to his disciples about the donkey. Jesus is able to predict everything that will happen, from the kind of animal to what answer will suffice to get the owner to hand it over. What God promised through that first multitude on Christmas Eve has already been delivered, and that's what this Palm Sunday multitude is so excited about.

When the Pharisees tell Jesus to shut down his multitude of disciples or his mob of civil agitators, depending on your perspective, Jesus poetically replies: "I tell you, if they were silent, the stones would shout out." It turns out that the "rocks" are singing all the time. According to NASA, the planets, stars, moons and every other astral body in our solar system literally produce sound. It's hauntingly beautiful, and each planet and star seems to have its own unique song. You can find them on YouTube easily enough, if you're curious and want to listen for yourself. We might describe it as a reverberation and a constant singing out in praise of the Creator of each planet and star. We just can't hear it, with our earth-bound, human ears. Which is a little like what has happened to the Pharisees.

All along, Jesus has been healing and teaching and miracle-ing real, heavenly peace into the world. Every sick person made whole, every heart transformed and action changed, every cast out demon or life restored, Jesus has been showing what real peace looks like; the way things ought to be.

Some people, even some Pharisees and Jewish leaders, even some Romans, they saw or experienced what Jesus was doing, and knew it for that real, shalom peace, and they were not afraid to see God at work and believe.

Jesus' answer to the Pharisees, that the stones would shout out if the people were silent, it really highlights what false peace can cost us: the ability to see the work of God in our midst. Jesus implies that living things - the Pharisees - cannot recognize life, and ironically, it is the lifeless stones who will not keep quiet about the life and power they see embodied in the person of Jesus Christ.

Any way you look at it, God's handiwork will worship and praise the peace and glory he brings.

But the peace between Judea and Rome - that's a perfect example of false peace.

The Pharisees recognize that the Romans have given a fair amount of leeway to the Jewish people, but if a political threat is felt by the Empire, then that "peace" would shatter. This is a peace rooted in fear. This is a peace that has to be maintained, held onto by compromise, by refusing to rock a rotten boat. It is not the kind of peace that Jesus has produced with his powerful acts. It is a peace that tries to keep things the same for the sake of stability, for the sake of avoiding an outcome we think is bad, for the sake of not having to face what we fear.

Jesus was literally born in the shadow of this false peace and fear, and his family had to flee to Egypt on a donkey because the government was murdering toddler boys after the Magi let the cat out of the bag.

But as we know from the Scripture narrative, Christ came to free humanity from false peace. Christ came to give us a peace that is lived, not borne like a burden, real peace that positively changes lives and our life together, in ways that a false peace would blind us to.

Christ's peace is real peace, rooted in willing, self-giving love, not in fear of having something taken from us. These two kinds of peace - real, heavenly peace and fearful, false peace - butted up against each other in this climatic moment of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem: a moment of joyous praise and victory from the perspective of the multitude of disciples, and an incident that the Pharisees feared could easily tip Jerusalem into all-out war with Rome. Fear keeps us from being able to wonder, to respond with joy and hope and recognition to the things Jesus is still doing in this world. It is very difficult from us humans to see God's way of peace. It is perhaps even more difficult for us to identify the powerful force of false peace that is ever present and at work in us and around us.

But there are no two ways about it: Jesus is king, no matter if or how or why we reject the idea. And he comes in the name of God, with peace and in glory. We know who Jesus is; we know why he was born, and we know why he died.

This is the journey that we make with Jesus each year during Holy Week: from the triumphal, premature celebration of Palm Sunday, to the suffering of the Cross on Good Friday and the real peace and real glory of Easter morning. It is not an easy journey to make. We can choose the safety of the sidelines with the cautious, politically astute Pharisees; or we can throw caution to the wind and wave our palms in the air as we follow Christ, from beginning to end, and to a new beginning, after. God in Christ is coming into the world bringing peace, and goes out of the world to make that peace powerful and vast enough to enfold us all. Thanks be to God. Amen.