

C Palm/Passion Sunday 4.10.22
Luke 19:28-40; Isaiah 50:4-9a
Focus: Jesus gives us what we need.

One of the commentaries I read this week referenced an English rock band from the sixties, and I've had the chorus of a song stuck in my head ever since. I'm just going to play the chorus for you, I think I know my audience well enough that you all will fill in the rest with just this. [play chorus].

"You can't always get what you want. But if you try sometimes, you just might find, you get what you need." The Rolling Stones basically just delivered the premise of what Palm Sunday has to do with Easter, of why we start out in the social hall waving palm branches and shouting Hosanna, and then every year I force you to listen to the entire passion narrative and totally ruin the mood of the whole service, of why today is such an emotional roller coaster. In this classic rock anthem, Mick Jagger nails it, Palm Sunday, dear people of God, is what we want. We want God to come charging into the city like a conquering hero. We want shouts of praise, we want to stoned to cry out. But we don't get that. Instead, we get gathering in an upper room, a meal between friends, betrayal in a garden, death on a cross, and an empty tomb. Palm Sunday is what we want. But Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, the long day of darkness that is Easter Saturday, and finally the glorious resurrection dawn of Easter, that, is what we need.

But let's start by talking about Palm Sunday, and Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. By this point, Jesus had been on his way to Jerusalem for a while. Since the Transfiguration, for us the beginning of Lent, for the Gospel, chapter nine, Jesus has been traveling with

single-minded focus. And now, after long last, the text tells us that Jesus was finally going up to Jerusalem, past the villages of Bethphage and Bethany on the outskirts of the city. This Bethphage and Bethany detail is important, because it places Jesus on the Mount of Olives, a location that the prophet Zechariah referenced when he spoke of the coming day of the Lord. Actually, let's jump back, because the writer of Luke does something really pretty impressive here in his description of this scene. He weaves together two different traditions, the tradition of the prophets promises of salvation throughout the Old Testament and the tradition of the conquering hero entering a city from Greco-Roman culture, to make the significance of this event crystal clear.

But let's look specifically at the entrance procession. Remember, this is Jerusalem in the first century, this is a place and a people used to conquering heroes parading in and out of the city. Jerusalem sits at the crossroads of the major trade routes, it gets/got conquered a lot. And these entrance processions always had four characteristics. First, the conqueror or ruler is escorted into the city by the army or citizens. Jesus approached with "the whole multitude of the disciples," so check. This procession was accompanied by hymns and acclamations. The crowds with Jesus shouted verses from Psalm one-eighteen, so praise, also check. Third, elements of the procession symbolized the power of the state. Jesus rode on a colt brought by the disciples, people spread garments on the road and praised him for his "deeds of power," check. Fourth, the procession concluded with some ritual of appropriation, where the ruler would symbolically take control of the city. Our reading stopped at the entry, but if we read on, Jesus' weeping over the city, entering the Temple,

and clearing it of the merchants are all examples of appropriation rituals which Jesus took part in. We are four for four in Jesus following the checklist of a triumphal entry.

But even as this checklist is being followed, there are clues that things are not what they seem, that this entry is different. The entering “army of the conqueror” is a rag-tag bunch of road weary disciples, the symbolic descriptions of authority are a baby donkey and the rags of travelers, the shouts of praise are cries for peace, the symbolic act of appropriation is weeping. The people want a revolt, they’re crying for it. It takes some guts to yell “Blessed is the king” in a Roman occupied territory. They want a king, they want a revolt, and they’re going to get one. Not an earthly one, but a heavenly one. This king has come not to overthrow the government, but to die at the hands of that government, and in dying destroy death itself. It should not be lost on us that the same crowd who shouts Hosanna today, will in just a few short days be calling for his crucifixion. Will leer and jeer as from the cross Jesus says, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

They did not know what they were doing. We do not know what we are doing. That’s the wonder and mystery of Holy Week. Every year, we enter into this story too big for us, with outsized expectations, and we do not know what we are doing. Dear people of God, the promise of Palm Sunday, the promise of Holy Week is just that, we do not know what we are doing, but God does. We may not get what we want, but God gives us what we need. So as we go through the motions and movements of this week. As we taste the bread and wine on our lips, as we stare in fear at the cross and in wonder of the empty tomb, know that you

do not have to get it. You cannot get it, in fact. This wonder is too big for us. It is the wonder of the coming kingdom of God. [pause]

Every year for the last eight years, Laurie has given me the good wisdom that we should not read all of the five assigned scripture readings for today, because it is just too many readings. Laurie is right, it is too many readings, we cannot follow all of those readings. However, most years I ignore Laurie's good wisdom and make you sit through all the readings anyway. And as proof of God's excellent sense of humor, this year I finally listened to Laurie's good advice and had us read only the Gospel texts for today, the processional gospel and the passion narrative, and not even all of the passion narrative, but parts. And God, in God's infinite humor, pulled my attention to part of the left-out Isaiah text, because God's a jokester like that. Anyway, I want to share with you just the opening lines from Isaiah fifty, verse four, because I think it gives us good guidance for entering into this week. "Morning by morning, [God] wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught."

Listen this week, to all that is happening. Not as one who knows where we are going, though it is a familiar story, but listen as one who is being taught. Let the familiarity of this text wrap around you and surprise you. Because here's the promise. God is doing a new, unexpected and surprising thing in this world. A thing bigger than us, bigger than our imaginations. We cannot see it, or at least we cannot see all of it. But it is what we need. Thanks be to God. Amen.