

Hosanna!

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on March 28, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church

After [Jesus] had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, 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. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this: 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. 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, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." (Luke 19:28-40, NRSV)

Today is Palm Sunday, the day on which we remember what has long been called Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. And in today's gospel reading, it *does* – for the time being – look triumphant! We see Jesus at the height of his popularity and fame. Messianic murmurings are in the air, and the authorities are getting nervous. And now, after nearly three years in the countryside of Galilee and Judea, Jesus is turning his sights towards Jerusalem.

He spoke with his disciples earlier about what all this means – that days of suffering and death are coming – but they seem unable to hear or understand. For them, and for thousands of peasants longing for freedom, Jesus entering Jerusalem is to be the beginning of greater things. The joyful exhilaration is palpable as the throng draws closer to the city gates.

For his disciples and for many, many more, this carpenter from Nazareth was more than a carpenter. He was a healer and a teacher ... he spoke with authority and compassion, proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom. But for many, he was more still ... he was *the One*. All the experience of their lives – in the face of Roman violence and oppression – had stirred up a thirst for justice and made them eager for a *reckoning*, and in their time spent in his presence, hearing his words and witnessing his power, they had come to know that the Spirit of God was at work, bringing about something radically new. The *Kingdom* was at hand!

His followers can taste it! They can see the crown placed upon Jesus' head! And they can see *themselves* at long last rewarded for their sacrifices! And so, as Jesus enters the gates of Jerusalem on a donkey, in conscious imitation of the words of the prophets, they and others

can only shout out “Hosanna!” (“Save us!”) and “Blessed is the *King* who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Which is *exactly* what the temple authorities in our text are *afraid* of. They know all too well that this is going to end badly – for themselves and everyone else – if these fools keep up their shouting and things get out of hand.

You see, these Jewish elites – a tiny percentage of the total Jewish population – had an understanding with the Romans: That in return for paying the annual tribute and for keeping the peace, these leaders had the assurance that they would be left alone to lead. The Romans couldn’t have cared less what the Jews believed or didn’t believe, but they *did* care *very much* about threats of insurrection and rebellion ... which meant that the *Jewish leaders* cared very much about threats of insurrection and rebellion, for fear that if things got out of control, then the conclusion would be as grim as it was certain: The Romans would come in and take care of business.

Now, here, in this story, it all comes to a head. Luke’s gospel presents Jerusalem as Jesus’ ultimate destination – where his ministry and mission would be fulfilled, where he would meet his destiny. But none of it is a surprise to Jesus. He understands full well the meaning of the events unfolding. Jesus alone knows what is going to happen and why.

He knows that from the moment he gets up onto that donkey and rides into Jerusalem to the shouts of his followers hailing him as the *coming king*, that his fate is sealed. The Jewish authorities’ instinct for self-preservation and the Roman taste for violence are, together, invincible. He knows that this confrontation will cost him his life. But he goes forward anyway. He rides forward to his death with both eyes open because he trusts in something else that to him is equally certain. And to this, he bears witness.

But to understand *why* Jesus got up on that donkey on *that* day, in *that* place, it helps to know that there were actually *two* processions into Jerusalem that day. The one we already know about came in from the east. But one also came in from the west. It was the procession of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, draped in the gaudy glory of imperial power: horses, chariots, swords and spears, gleaming armor, golden eagles mounted on poles.

He moved in with the army at the beginning of Passover week to make sure nothing got out of hand. Insurrection always seemed to be in the air with these people – remember that the Passover festival itself re-lives God’s liberation of the people from an earlier empire! – and so Pilate would take no chances. It was a procession meant to *intimidate*, to *overwhelm* ... a little “shock and awe” to proclaim the invincibility of Rome and the lordship of Caesar, the one who had brought “peace” to the earth – at the point of a sword.

From the east came the other procession, a procession of peasants, with Jesus in an ordinary robe riding on a young donkey. The careful preparations for it suggest that what Jesus had

planned was a highly symbolic, prophetic act. It had in mind a prophecy of Zechariah – of the coming of a new *kind* of king, a king of peace who will dismantle the weaponry of war.

This is what we have to understand: Jesus' procession *deliberately* counters what is happening on the other side of the city. Pilate's procession embodies the power, glory, and violence of the empire which rules the world. Jesus' procession embodies an alternative vision – that of the Kingdom of God ... a vision of justice and equity, of non-violence and healing and peace ... *God's own dream for this world.*

While those greeting Jesus with shouts of Hosanna *do* misunderstand what's happening, they are right in seeing that there *is* something precious at stake ... a *Kingdom* is at stake. You might even say that this Palm Sunday story is a Tale of Two Kingdoms: the Kingdom of Caesar and its "peace" rooted in violence, oppression, and exploitation ... and the Kingdom of *God* and its peace rooted in God's justice and all-encompassing love. And when these kingdoms clash in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on that fateful day, there is no question, for Jesus, what will happen: Love will meet hate, and *love will be crucified*. In *that* respect, from the moment his procession enters the city, the outcome is certain.

As with Jesus' time, so with ours. When we consider our own world, it may seem like Love doesn't have a chance. Unjust suffering is everywhere. Candles of courage and beauty are snuffed out every day by forces of chaos and destruction. Even now, an invisible enemy is wreaking havoc around the world. We know all this is true, and we plead to Heaven, "Why?" There's *no one* who doesn't ask that.

And yet, there is something in the heart that resists ... That this is *not* all that there is ... That this is *not* the end of the story ... That it's *not* all over ... That unjust suffering does *not* have the final word as we face the mystery of life and death. Perhaps you know the longing that tears your heart in two as you grasp on to hope that, somehow, Life and Love will finally prevail. This faith business is not for the faint of heart.

Jesus, better than anyone, knows what is going to happen. He is entirely realistic. But he also bears witness to a still deeper truth, something that his disciples would come to know in time: that it is precisely this defeat, this self-sacrifice of Love, *which is the very means of its triumph*. C.S. Lewis called it the "deeper magic from before the dawn of time." *Love's defeat is the means of its victory.*

And so, when Jesus is told to order his disciples to stop their shouts of praise for the coming king, he responds, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." This amazing line hearkens back to the prophetic warning of another Old Testament prophet – Habakkuk – who condemned the elites of his own day who callously exploited the people,

*Alas for you who get evil gain for your houses,
setting your nest on high to be safe from the reach of harm!
You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples;*

you have forfeited your life.

The very stones will cry out from the wall,

and the plaster will respond from the woodwork. (Habakkuk 2:9-11, NRSV)

In this procession, the very stones themselves will bear witness to the injustice and evil to come! And the stones themselves will bear witness that injustice and evil will not prevail in the end! The stones of the house built on corruption "will cry out from the wall," and in that day, in certain anticipation of that day, the stones' shouts of protest will give way to shouts of praise, bearing witness to the final triumph of God.

It is this faith we declare and seek to live into today: that in defiance of the powers of this world to hurt, kill, and destroy, that God's victory is certain ... the final victory of God's love, justice, and peace is certain ... and that we may therefore face the future with courage and shouts of praise. Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Amen.