

**April 5, 2020**  
**Palm Sunday**

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## **A Story of Triumph and Tears**

Philippians 2:5-11      Luke 19:29-48

Thus far in Lent we have looked closely at Jesus and his teachings, which have sharp edges, for example the story of Calvary and the cross. These are things that can be said to contain “hazardous material”—in the context of our assumptions and attitudes. Palm Sunday is in many ways just such a story—but in this case, it is told not by Jesus, but about him. To a great extent the Palm Sunday narrative evokes in us similar questions to those we have considered so far in Lent, about several of Jesus’ commands for his followers. Where is God in the story?... and second, where are we—what are its implications for us?

This morning we encounter a very familiar narrative, but it’s not necessarily well-understood. We customarily refer to the Palm Sunday episode as “the triumphant entry.” I suppose that’s how most people think of it: as a moment of triumph. But as Luke tells it, the triumph is muffled, and it ends in tears—and the tears are the most important part. Things get underway when Jesus, riding on a colt, and his followers reach the outskirts of Jerusalem, when he receives what can only be described as a “royal welcome.” People spread garments in his way, making a sort of carpet, and as he rides along they shout, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord.”

All four Gospels tell this story in roughly the same way. As with Christmas, so with Palm Sunday: we tend to have in mind a composite picture, taking something from one Gospel and something else from another; but there are unique items in Luke’s account which are worthy of notice. For one thing, in Luke’s version, only the disciples are involved in the welcoming celebration. There is no mention of the sizable crowds which are described in the other Gospels. It could be that Luke’s account, in fact, is more accurate, since he pictures Jesus as being cheered on by his most fervent, loyal followers.

These are not the people who later demand his execution. While the disciples misunderstood the message Jesus intended by his entry, and while most of them deserted him in the end, they were not so fickle as to praise Jesus on Sunday, and then scream for his death a few days later. Another noteworthy aspect of Luke’s account is the marked absence of nationalistic or political overtones. There is no mention of “Hosannas!”—or of palms interestingly, or of branches cut from trees—all of which were prime figures of national festivals in that time and place. There also is no reference to David in Luke, the most prominent of Israel’s military heroes, and the most revered of her rulers. Jesus is greeted as a “king,” but as one who comes to bring “peace.”

Again, only Luke mentions the Pharisees in this Palm Sunday account, whom we have met before. Here, they admonish Jesus to order his disciples to cease and desist their celebrating. Perhaps they were worried that it would be viewed as an insurrectionist activity, to which the Roman soldiers would respond with repressive measures. Or the Pharisees may have been simply registering their own disagreement or unbelief. In any case, Jesus responds by affirming his disciples' adulation: "If these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Most significant in Luke's account is what he says happened next. As Jesus reached the brow of the hill, "and saw the city, he wept over it..." As you know, the shedding of tears may signify numerous possible emotions: sorrow, or self-pity; pain—but also joy; remorse—but relief as well. What, then, are we to make of the tears of Jesus? They were not tears of joy, as if he were seeing Jerusalem only after a lifetime of longing to do so. His tears were not for himself. According to the Gospels, Jesus realized full well the brewing storm. We can imagine that he did not relish the thought of what was about to happen to him. But his were not tears of self-pity—rather, he wept for the city he was entering, for a people who did not know "the things that make for peace."

He wept because they did not know him—and he wept for a population that was doomed, but oblivious to its dangerous future. He wept because nobody had a clue about how to stop the approaching devastation—least of all those who were presumed to be the leaders. Jesus wept for the children who would be crushed, as children almost always are crushed when a society loses its way. The tears wept by Jesus were tears of sorrow, tears of lament—they were anything but sentimental.

This we know because of what happened next. Luke says, "He entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there." Sometimes the tears we shed are sentimental, for example at a wedding—but though we might then feel better, such tears usually don't prod us to do anything. Jesus' tears provoked a confrontation with the religious establishment—and that, says Luke, is how the first Palm Sunday ended.

Now back to the questions I posed earlier: What does this story say about God? How does it speak to us? One thing it says to me concerns the character of God. It tells me that God is different from what many people assume. There are those who picture God as aloof, as detached, as both unmoved and unaffected by the things that happen around us, among us, or within us. But if, as the Christian faith claims—and as I certainly believe—the words and deeds of Jesus are a clear and unambiguous revelation of God, then this story calls into question any such "isolating image" of God.

In the Jesus who weeps over the city, we see God as desiring the good of the human family, the God who longs to embrace us, and who yearns to show us "the things that make for peace." We see a God in whom events and human actions arouse joy or sorrow, pleasure or wrath. In other words, we see a God who is deeply compassionate. The greatest sign of all—of God's care and compassion—is a sign that meets us whenever we gather here for worship. The cross is the most profound witness to the love of God, to God's identification with human suffering and sorrow.

But the tears of Jesus shed that day when he came within sight of Jerusalem say the same thing. The Jesus who wept, and the Jesus who died on the cross, both reveal God as

anything but aloof or absent. And I hope that those of you, probably because of the Coronavirus, who are now experiencing some great sadness or sorrow of your own, will trust that you are not weeping alone; that, in the words of the old hymn: "There is no place where earth's sorrows are more felt than up in heaven."

Fashioning an image of God is something we human beings do—we cannot help but do it. As you imagine God, remember that one fine spring day, as Jesus came within sight of the city of Jerusalem, he wept over it. Let those tears of Jesus teach us, so that when our heart breaks, we will know that God's heart is also breaking. Let the "crying Jesus" point us to a God who cares.

Beyond what it says to me about God, this story about Jesus weeping over Jerusalem makes me wonder what he must be doing today, with so many people around the world contracting the Coronavirus, and many not surviving. At that time, according to Luke, he said, "If you had only recognized the things that make for peace!" What must Jesus be saying now, after all these years, after all the wars and all the brutal conflicts that have continued.

What must his reaction be when people suffer and die from a fast-moving virus around the earth. What must Jesus be thinking about what someone has called our "bristling, hating, adversarial, killing generation?" Jesus shed tears when he thought of how the children of Jerusalem would be the victims, in the destruction of Jerusalem that took place only one generation after Jesus' time on earth. What weeping must he be doing today, when he looks in on our society, where 2,000 children annually die a violent death, and where the number of children who are seriously injured by one form of abuse or another has quadrupled in the last decade, and is now over half a million per year?

What tears must Jesus be shedding, when he looks at the Church which bears his name, and claims to be his "body," and sees it squandering its energy, squabbling over the non-essentials, when all the while the world around us is dying for lack of hope? What must he be thinking of his Church when, in his name, it says and does things which are so far from his spirit? "If you only recognized the things that make for peace!" That is what he said then.

Can you not hear him saying it now, amidst his tears? I hear in this story a word about God, and a word about the state of our world. I hear also a word spoken to Jesus' followers today: to you, and to me. In the story, when the disciples are sent for the donkey, Jesus says that if they are questioned about taking the donkey, they are to say, "The Lord needs it." It prompts me to wonder: What does the Lord need today? He doesn't need a donkey, certainly. He doesn't even need our hosannas, or our songs of praise. I think he welcomes them—now, as then—if they come from his disciples, from the people who truly love him, and truly care for the things about which he cares.

What he needs is us. He needs us to weep with him over the sinful state of our nation's priorities. For too long, we have been spending more money on prisons than on public schools; we have been thinking of national security mostly in military terms; and for far too long, we have been telling our neediest brothers and sisters—especially the elderly poor and military veterans—to choose daily between necessary medicines and minimal nutrition. It's high time we start to demand many changes—to do otherwise would be not only stupid, but

downright sinful. Christ needs us to say so. Happily, in my estimation, most of our state governments are hearing those demands by virtue of the changes they are putting in place to fight the Coronavirus.

Jesus needs us to learn from him, “the things that make for peace,” and then to represent these things in our communities, in our churches, among our colleagues, as citizens, in all our attitudes and actions, even in and through such efforts as the One Great Hour of Sharing offering. Jesus needs us, not simply to weep, and certainly not to despair, but to care enough about what we see to want to do something to change it. Luke’s version of the first Palm Sunday is not a happy one. He emphasizes not the triumph, but the tears of Jesus. So: is there any word of hope and encouragement? There is! It consists in the fact that the One who came to Jerusalem in the name of the compassionate God keeps coming: in some mysterious way, he still comes among us, although you and I most likely would have given up long ago.

But in spite of rejection after rejection, Jesus still comes, still haunts our memories, still stimulates our spirits, still encourages our caring, and still calls forth our courage. And he still promises that, if we want to know “the things that make for peace,” he will show us! The only remaining question is, “Do we want to know that?”