

**April 14, 2019 (Palm Sunday)**

**TEXT: [Luke 19:28–40](#)**

**TITLE: Faith + Community**

*By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf*

Painter el SEED created a piece of art in the neighborhood of the garbage collectors in Cairo Egypt. He painted a mural the covered fifty buildings in this community—each home displaying a smaller piece of the larger art. His hope was, initially, to beautify a poor, marginalized community—a group of people isolated because of their work collecting and sorting the garbage of Cairo, right in their own neighborhood. But el SEED’s artwork had a twist: in order to view the piece in its entirety, one had to climb to the top of the Muqattam Mountain adjacent to this community, and look down to see the houses altogether. From this perspective alone, do the fragmented sections of the artwork become one. Here alone you can read the phrase painted in Arabic calligraphy across the buildings—a quote from St. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria that reads *“Anyone who wants to see the sunlight clearly needs to wipe his eyes first.”*<sup>1</sup>

Today’s Biblical story is an exercise in perspective as well. The passage is familiar to us. We read verses about Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem each year the Sunday before Easter. This day gets its own name: *Palm Sunday*, even though Luke’s particular account of the story does not include Palm branches at all! Jesus is heading into Jerusalem with his disciples to celebrate Passover, and rides into town on a colt that he ordered the disciples to borrow from someone else. As he enters the area, people lay their cloaks on the ground to prepare a path for him, singing praises to God and crying out “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” The songs of the people lining the streets echo the song of the angels at Jesus’ birth—who filled the skies with an announcement of “Peace on earth and glory in the highest heavens.” Today, however, the people of earth herald Jesus’ impending death with songs of peace in the highest heaven.

We know where this road will take him. This procession is prologue to the events that unfold in Jerusalem: a supper in an upper room, a nighttime prayer in a garden, the betrayal of a friend. We know that this path toward the Mount of Olives will eventually wind around so that Jesus will find himself at the top of another hill called Golgotha—or the Place of the Skull. We know that these voices singing around Jesus, surrounding him with affection, praising God, will soon give way to other cries: a crowd crying out for his crucifixion, cries of those who love him as they witness his suffering.

With this foreknowledge, we can select our vantage point for this story. We can decide, if we wish, to play a game of theological leapfrog and jump from one day of joy to another: praising a humble teacher lifted up on a donkey today and praising a risen Lord, lifted up from the grave next week. Or we can choose to follow Jesus on this path into Jerusalem and face the harsh turns in the —a story of denial, of false allegations, and the arrest, torture and execution of an innocent man.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/el\\_seed\\_a\\_project\\_of\\_peace\\_painted\\_across\\_50\\_buildings/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/el_seed_a_project_of_peace_painted_across_50_buildings/transcript?language=en)

This is an exercise for us in daily life too: We can choose to see the best of humanity and how it unfolds through acts of kindness, expressions of creativity, and even tough decisions to advocate for those who are different from us. We can, by the same token, choose to face the limitations of humanity—our wishy-washy nature, our propensity to sin, the reality of how often we choose to turn away from God, even when God turns toward us.

We can choose to find ourselves in the comfortable places of the story: in the stranger who let the disciples take his colt, in the women who stay by Jesus through it all, in the voice of the risen Christ who calls those he loves by name—just as we can choose to stay in the comfort zones of our lives: in communities with people just like us. Or we can dare to enter into the more complicated places of our text and the world and explore areas in our lives in which fear might have gotten the best of us, or even when we have allowed our perception of people and events to be shaped by the crowd especially when that giving us a message emboldened or empowered us.

There are tensions that exist all throughout the twelve short verses we read together today. There is the tension of unrestrained praise of the crowds and the group of Pharisees trying to hold Jesus and the crowds back. (In all fairness, we're not sure if this group of Pharisees is reprimanding Jesus or warning him, asking him to scale things back to help keep him safe.) Then there is the tension between two parades: the parade we read about today, as Jesus is celebrated by those in the streets, and, as Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan point out, the parade of Pilate and his Roman officials who would also be entering Jerusalem on horses and wearing the regalia of the Empire, arriving there to be "keepers of the peace" during the Passover festival<sup>2</sup>. There is the tension, then, between human agency and God's power.

So where do we fit in this story?

First, we enter this story together. We do not arrive on our own, but take our place among the crowds. Whatever we bring: our praises, our cloaks, our palm branches, our warnings, our fears, our colts, we offer our piece as a part of the whole, we help to shape the larger community. We do this every Sunday when we gather to worship—and frankly we do it every day. We bring our talents, our ideas, our money, our votes, our feelings, our perceptions, our annoyances, our fears, our voices, our sins and our hopes to any situation—whether we are going out into the community in mission together, or whether we are standing in line at the grocery store.

We bring who we are to something bigger than ourselves, and together form a community.

So who are WE as a community of faith? What is our larger collective identity at ELPC? Together we worship a God who claims us as God's own. Together we acknowledge that God made each one of us different, unique, and we celebrate our differences even as we celebrate the unity we have in Christ. Together we acknowledge that God has

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<sup>2</sup> Borg, Marcus and John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2006.

called us to something bigger—to be participants in God’s kingdom building, to be agents of love and peace and justice.

But we still live in many ways as a Palm Sunday people. We gather together and proclaim Jesus as our king and savior. We raise our voices in praise and everything seems to stop for a moment. Our focus shifts from our worries and burdens and to-do lists to this man whose teachings and miracles precede him and catch our attention. We are drawn to his love, we want some for ourselves—we want to be changed. And in response, we want to be agents of change. We want to share the love that has transformed us and help to build Christ’s kingdom of justice and peace.

But we are limited in our understanding and in our ability to follow. Our hosannas stop and life gets back to normal. We become preoccupied with the day to day and the exceptional moments around us—with all that is to be done and all we want to do. I remember as a child, climbing into the back seat of our family car with my sisters after worship. Even with the promise of a McDonald’s lunch if we behaved ourselves, by the time we were reaching for our seat belts there were squabbles most weeks, even when our heads were bowed in reverence and our voices were singing loudly just moments earlier.

But even as we encounter the limits of our understanding, the limits of our praise, and the limits of our ability to follow our Savior King, we must remember the unstated truth of that Palm Sunday processional—the truth at the heart of all of the bumbling limitation and pathetic lack of understanding. The truth is that we were fooling ourselves to think that it was *our* praise that made Jesus king in the first place. And those who gathered to sing the first chorus of hosannas were fooling themselves if they thought that any of *their* pomp and circumstance anointed or appointed Jesus as King.

See, the good news is that it’s not *us* who make Jesus king. It is not *us* who crown him, and it’s not even our obedience that enthrones him. Honestly our attempts to do so are limited at best or distorted at worst, for when we are the ones who try to place the crown upon his head, we may find that we really are trying to claim him to be not who he IS, but who *we want* him to BE. In our weaker moments, we might even think by claiming him as our own, he will do our bidding, advance our platform.

But, thanks be to God—that it is not up to us! Jesus’ authority comes from God alone. *The kingdom he came to usher into this world is not one of our own making but is one that expresses the fullness of God’s will—of wholeness and reconciliation, of freedom from oppression, of gracious, unmerited love that will rule every day of all eternity.*

By God’s grace, the truth of the matter is that we are NOT simply a Palm Sunday people trying to do it alone, trying in our own meager way to claim Jesus as our King. Rather: we are an *Easter* people, whose personal and corporate limitation has been overcome by God’s great love for us that came to us in Christ Jesus. We worship a God whose love is so great that this God took on our flesh, entered into our lives, and overcame the sin, the pain, the brokenness that afflicts us and separates us from God.

So let us follow the advice of St. Athanasius. Let us wipe our eyes today so that we might see Jesus, the Son of God, Light of the World, who has come to us as one of us to save us. Let us wipe our eyes so that we might see the kingdom he is here to proclaim and partner with Christ to manifest the beautiful, unified vision of God's peace on earth.

Yes, thanks be to God.