

## April 14, 2019 Journey worship (Palm Sunday)

TEXT: [Luke 19:28–40](#)

THEME: Awakening

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, you can read the phrase painted in Arabic calligraphy across the buildings—a quote from St. Athanasius 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 echo the song of the angels at Jesus' birth, who filled the skies with an announcement of “Peace on earth.” As the heavens heralded Jesus' birth with songs of peace, so now the people of earth herald his 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 story—a story of denial, of false allegations, and the arrest, torture and execution of an innocent man.

---

<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)

We can choose to see the best of humanity—those who in a moment seem to get it and recognize the face of God in Christ. Or we can face the limitations of humanity—our wishy-washy nature, our propensity to sin, 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. Or we can dare to enter into the more complicated places 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 because the crowd was giving us a message that emboldened or empowered us.

This tension exists in 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 to be "keepers of the peace" during the Passover festival. They would come riding horses rather than a lowly colt, clothed in the regalia of the empire, with the might of the Roman army behind them. There is the tension, then, between human agency and God's power.

So where do we fit in this story?

We live in many ways as a Palm Sunday people. We gather together and do our best to proclaim Jesus as king and savior. We raise our voices in praise and everything seems to stop for a moment. Our focus shifts 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 even more, 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. No, we don't forget the parade—in fact we know that when our voices all blended together we sounded better than we ever have alone, yes, even in the shower. In fact, we won't ever forget that sound. But we don't always live into the truth it proclaims. We don't always live as if we are in the presence of our Savior King. We don't always live as if we are in the midst of the one who will set us free from that which binds us, the one whose presence makes us better together than we ever were alone.

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 procession—the truth at the heart of all of the stumbling 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.