

Palm (or Cloak?) Sunday (14Apr19)
Luke 19:29-44

How you tell a story matters.

We know this is a culminating moment, since all the way back at Ash Wednesday we heard Jesus had his face set to go to Jerusalem. At last he arrives, but maybe not exactly how we expect.

We paraded around with Olive the mini-donkey, but we might notice that Luke doesn't mention a donkey in the reading today. It says a colt. My inexpert researching says a young donkey is called a foal generally, or jack or jenny based on gender.

Maybe we're dealing with translation issues going back to the King James Version misnaming it a baby male horse and we don't have to presume the original people, in their agrarian land-based environment, were confused into thinking Jesus was supposed to show up on a donkey but accidentally actually came in on a baby horse.

They'd recognize a donkey, and they would recognize, more specifically, that it wasn't a war horse. They'd recognize that Jesus was following in patterns celebrating the original three Israelite donkey-riding kings: Saul, David, and Solomon (whose name even means King Peace) and when the prophet Zechariah set the stage by speaking of a king who would come on a donkey, that king wouldn't be a warrior, but would preside over peace.* Jesus is acclaimed for a reign of peace.

Besides the colt-not-donkey distinction without a difference, we might also notice Luke tells the story without palms or branches or anything like that. Instead, there are cloaks. I guess instead of "Palm Sunday," we should technically call this Cloak Sunday, huh? That spreading is another biblical image for greeting to receive a king.

I want to point out something, since the translation "cloak" may make us think of a British gentleman dapperly draping his cape over a

puddle for a damsel exiting a carriage. Most of the time this word here isn't translated "cloak," but simply "clothes." See, these people had two layers of clothing. One was a softer layer closer to the skin, maybe like we'd think of underwear (or for the fancy and sporty of us, a base layer).

This outer layer wasn't one of the jackets they chose out of their closet for marching outside on a cool and damp spring day. Neither was it selected from hangers in a closet or drawers in a dresser. These folks didn't even have closets or dressers, because almost all of them only had one set of clothes.

Here in Holy Week, one neat detail I like to share is that in the early church baptisms only happened at Easter. Late at night, they'd go down to the river to pray, and with the rising sun (like the rising s-o-n Jesus), they'd be baptized naked, naked as the day they were re-born, we might say. Then coming out of the water they'd get new clothes.

The white gowns that babies still wear is sort of a carryover from that sense of newness, of putting on Christ, of a fresh start and new beginning, a new life. We have trouble getting much of that feel because, even if you're getting a spiffy new outfit for Easter, it may be special and pretty, but isn't the clothes you'll also go on to wear on Monday through the rest of the week until they wear out.

Even though you do have other clothes to change into, still today you probably wouldn't be very eager to take off your jacket or your sweater or whatever clothes and toss them in a heap for Olive the mini donkey to tread on (or, as I know many of you have been speculating, to do something else on).

Your having spare wardrobe on hand magnifies the devotion or excitement when these people peel off their shirts and toss them on the road in front of Jesus. They are poor, with nothing more than the shirts on their backs, and yet give themselves to rejoicing that this peaceful king means good things for them.

That low estate of humble origins also points to another detail in how this story is told. That

* 1Samuel10:1-2, 16:20, 1Kings1:33, Zechariah9:9
<https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-the-kings-donkey-luke-1928-40/>

joyful exuberant crowd is singing, "Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" If we're paying attention to Luke's story, those words may well sound like an echo for us, or a bookend, or another prelude. It may make you think back to Christmas when at Jesus' birth, as he was hailed with royal kingly titles, a heavenly chorus sang, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace!" So as that song was a prelude at the beginning, to who Jesus would be through his life and ministry, this song by the crowds today, "Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven," is the prelude at the end, to who Jesus would be in this final week and grand finale.

Similar to that humble, lowly birth, an outcast laid in a manger, he is here celebrated by the lowly and poor, as well. Yet what only angels and their audience of shepherds knew at his birth, now it says "the whole multitude of the disciples" knows and celebrates. It's common knowledge, known by all the common folks throughout the land, that this guy means good news of salvation.

That also points us to another really good detail in how Luke tells the story. You may be acquainted with old Good Friday or Passion Sunday readers' theatre where the congregation had the voice of the crowd, of the people, including being forced to shout out "Crucify him! Crucify him!" It's a difficult vehemence to get your lips around and leaves a sour taste in your mouth.

But that's not how it works in Luke's telling. Here on Palm Sunday, the common folks of the community recognize this king who comes in the name of the Lord and celebrate this savior, this one who comes to save people of every nation. We're used to bitter details of betrayal and desertion, but Luke finds loyalty and hope, that even when all the powers turn against Jesus, still some of these people won't flee, but will be standing by with him all the way to the very end, and beyond.

And yet, we may wonder if that is futile, wasted effort, devotion that bears no good result, pointless in the end, that they took a risk to be with Jesus, and had hope in him as the king given

by God, but instead of getting peace or singing glory to heaven, by Friday of this week, maybe they're saying, "What in heaven's name were we thinking?" Jesus will be dead, and this whole festive day will seem like a long way in the past, and maybe even foolish. Those selfish and shortsighted leaders didn't know the things that make for peace, opting instead for enmity and hatred and violence. Still, as ever too often, it will seem that they have won, that these people acclaimed the wrong king, and that the God of the lowly is just a loser on the side of losers.

But in telling this story, there's one more line that is my very favorite. Knowing he is at risk, some people try to get Jesus to tamp down this big Cloak Sunday parade. "Tell these rowdy people to stop all their singing, all this confronting the powers that be!" And Jesus replies with the line, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

I like that line for the times when I do feel like a failed follower, like a fleeing disciple, like I'm not offering the praise or filled with the confidence I should be, like this is all foolish and bleak in my view, like God's ways may not really matter much in the world, and so I just don't know what to do. Jesus says it's not dependent on me. If I happened to forget or get distracted, if my doubt stifles my lips and turns praise to a mumble, the stones will sing out. For a king of all creation, it certainly is not up to me to praise. At best, I join in the hymn of all creation.

Yet that does make me wonder when it might be true, not only as hyperbole, but when stones do shout. So I looked up where stones appear in Luke's Gospel. And coming up on Easter morning, the women disciples get to the tomb, expecting to find death, to be confronted again with a dead end, with the loss and the sorrow of a king who didn't reign very long, with praises drowned out.

They will find the stone rolled away. That yawning gap of a stone, that stone that opened its mouth and let loose Jesus is a stone that shouts and sings of life that wins, of a king who is only beginning to reign, of peace that prevails over

violence, of salvation let loose for all, of redemption for the poor and lowly, of good news that cannot be silenced. That Easter stone shouts unfailingly. And today, with stones, with cloaks, with crowds, with donkeys, with EcoPalms, with burned prairie, with two congregations, with our hearts and our hopes, we, too, risk opening our lips to shout glory and praise and Hosanna. We tell a story that matters.