

Climbing Toward Zion
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
Reading from the Gospels: Luke 19:28-40

"All glory, laud, and honor to thee, Redeemer King, to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring ... The people of the Hebrews with palms before thee went; our praise and prayers and anthems before thee we present." Yippee! Or is that too over-the-top? Christians have long struggled with exactly what to do with the liturgy of the palms, Palm Sunday. It falls in such an awkward space. Six Sundays into the sobriety and contemplative reflection of Lent, Palm Sunday represents the gateway to Holy Week with its looming thunderclouds of Christ's betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion.

Hosanna, loud Hosanna, the little children sang? Sort of disrupts the mood of the march toward the cross, doesn't it? There are many churches that hold to the tradition of "burying the alleluias" during Lent. In fact, we've practiced it a couple of times here, symbolically hiding written and sung alleluias, only to bring them out again on Easter Sunday. So, what about Hosanna? Is that like a lower degree of alleluia? Like, can we sing it as long as we do it softly, and maybe not smile?

Easter, much like Christmas, we know how to do. Break out the seersucker and pastels in the South, along with bonnets, baskets, hair ribbons, brightly colored eggs, and that all-important sacred symbol - the chocolate bunny. Ash Wednesday, we've got that one down pat also: sin being such an easy subject for the church ... well, as long as it's someone else's sin. Drive through ashes, blackened crosses on the forehead, confession, or at least, confession lite. Fat Tuesday? That's easy - pancakes and partying, king cake and beads, Mardi Gras parades and hangovers.

But Palm Sunday ... Other than a brief spike in the sale of palm fronds, there's not a whole lot to market here. Target doesn't reserve a special section for Palm Sunday candy. There are no trees to decorate, costumes to design, or palm-shaped cookies to bake. Preachers even query one another: *Are you all doing Palm Sunday this year?* And we're not even sure what to do with the palms. A first-year pastor will get all excited about authenticity, you know real palm fronds that you can burn after today, saving the ashes for next year's Ash Wednesday service. However, after today those rookie preachers will be looking for an alternative after experiencing that portent of doom when the eyes of

the church's children light up with the realization that palms fronds are shaped suspiciously like swords. En garde!

We're just not sure what to do with Palm Sunday, a conundrum made even more confusing on years when we're reading the story in Luke. Did you notice what was missing in the reading this morning? Palms. Luke makes no mention of palms, or even Mark's leafy branches. No, in Luke we have cloaks. So, does that make this cloak Sunday? Should I throw my robe on the center aisle? You want to toss your North Face down there? Maybe explain the footprints all over your jacket to the friends you're meeting for brunch? And if we're truly shooting for authentic, you know how the liturgy of the palms would end? When the children process down the aisle singing and waving their palms, Whitney and I would play the Pharisees down front, chanting, "You all quiet down. Be still. What do you think this is, some kind of party? It's Lent, for Christ's sake. Hush up!"

What's going on here? What are we to make of Palm/leafy branch/dirty jacket Sunday? All four Gospel authors thought it significant enough to include it, though there was limited agreement on the details. What could it be that Luke wants us to understand? Is it a

raucous parade, a solemn procession? Was it performance art? Street theatre? Was it scripted, the whole scene carefully laid out and mapped by an event planner? Or was it a spontaneous Spirit-led eruption of praise?

If it was an event planner setting the stage, the sponsors probably should have hired a different vendor. You know this, parades take place on broad, mostly level avenues. You wouldn't want the trombones tripping on a steep slope or risk a homecoming float breaking loose and speeding out of control down a hill. Yet, consider the setting of today's text. We begin on the Western slope of the Mount of Olives, which lies east of Jerusalem, separated from Jerusalem's temple mount by the Kidron Valley.

As the crow flies, it is not a long distance at all. Yet, to get from Point A to Point B you have to navigate your way down, not a horrible, but a moderately arduous slope. Think switchbacks on a mountain trail, but of course, these would be unpaved. When in Haiti, we hiked up to the old ruins of a fort atop a mountain peak. That was no simple National Park trail as you would find up at Linville. We left before dawn at 5:00am and made it back to the school compound after noon,

and we were dragging. The climb, obviously, was a challenge, but so was the descent. You see, on the way down, any loose gravel you encountered would slip under your feet, giving you a minor heart attack every 20 meters or so. You could feel your whole body tensing up.

So, here is Jesus sitting atop what is called variously, depending on the gospel, foal, colt, ass, mule. Thus, Jesus has to trust the donkey to watch his step on the loose gravel. I don't know what the mule was thinking, but you have to think Jesus is wondering whether this photo op was such a good idea. And, once they make it down to the Kidron valley, they don't have but a moment before they start climbing an equally challenging ascent to get to Jerusalem's gate and the summit of Zion, the temple mount.

For a modern tourist, it is surely a meaningful spiritual experience and a manageable physical exercise, but what was that procession like for Jesus and his disciples? The trail was probably more primitive and not as smooth, but I think we must remember that Jesus was bearing the additional weight of expectations held by those who were following him, along with the heavy burden of knowing that with each mule step, he is closer to a violent and torturous scenario no one

who bleeds would ever hope to face. As Ukrainians are discovering as they re-enter decimated villages and cities, hate, when organized and armed, quickly becomes unconscionably sadistic.

The processions and parades of powers and potentates were not uncommon around Jerusalem. When we visit our son in D.C., the experience is still unique enough for me that I stop and gawk as a phalanx of burly black SUVs, Cadillac limos, and a coterie of siren-sounding, lights-flashing cop cars and motorcycles speed by. Is the President headed to the Capitol, or is the Secretary of State headed to the grocery store? Processions are often weighted with symbols or messages to those who observe them. I grew up seeing periodic news reports in the days of the old U.S.S.R., with video from Moscow's Red Square. The Soviet premiere would stand on the wall overlooking the square as a parade of military vehicles carrying intercontinental ballistic missiles passed beneath him. The message was unmistakable. "We are powerful and will destroy any who oppose us, whether they be foreign powers or Russian citizens."

At the end of the classic movie *Patton*, we see the general in full uniform, 5-stars on his helmet, riding atop a stately white stallion,

perhaps a Lipizzaner, while a group of officers stand at attention near him. The message is, again, transparent. *I am powerful, heroic, worthy of honor, and fully in control.*

Don't you know that whenever Pontius Pilate or King Herod approached Jerusalem, there was a carefully choreographed procession to communicate power and intimidate the citizenry?

So, Jesus begins the awkward journey down the mountain path, sitting atop a young unbroken, never been ridden upon, colt as those who have been following during his ministry cover the path before him with their cloaks. There is a message here that Luke intends to offer, using two images from the Old Testament.

In Zechariah the prophet envisions the inbreaking of God's kingdom of peace: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations." What is Luke saying in quoting this?

This Jesus, God's son, is not a warrior king, but a king who invokes peace.

The second Old Testament lesson Luke uses is heard in the voices of Jesus' disciples spontaneously quoting a form of Psalm 118: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" This is the psalm that also says to those approaching/entering Jerusalem's temple: "This is the gate of the LORD through which the righteous may enter." In addition, Luke adds language echoing that of the angel choir in the story of Jesus' birth. "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" Luke is saying, this is a king, our king, but unlike the powers and principalities of this world, his will be a kingdom not defined by borders but marked by peace; not governed by intimidation but ruled with love. It is in Psalm 118 that we also read: "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever."

Steadfast love. Oh, there's that word again. In Hebrew it is *hesed*, the word that ties together the whole narrative of God's journey with the people of God's creation. Steadfast love (*hesed*). Unfailing, unfading, inexhaustible, boundless, never giving up on you. Knowing what Jesus knew about to what suffering the road ahead would inevitably lead, I

wonder if amidst the theatre of praise around him, Jesus was silently chanting to himself, "Steadfast love, steadfast love, steadfast love..."

I have a dear friend who recently knew the possibility that the meeting she was about to enter could go sideways, and she did not want that to impact the hospitality she so desperately wanted to represent. Sure enough, as soon as the meeting started, she was being treated dismissively and with patronizing arrogance, as if her role and what she represented were irrelevant. So, she kept that countenance of hospitality bubbling, silently chanting to herself, *welcoming and gracious, welcoming and gracious...* She was so poised. It was brilliant!

I can't quite manage that. Oh, I can bite my lip and keep my mouth shut ... most of the time. But I guess I don't have a good poker face, because when we're out and confronted by boorish behavior, bad performances, or dismissiveness, Donna, still smiling and with a countenance of elegance, will lean over to me and say, "Fix your face."

When you know that you are headed toward an encounter that holds the potential for unpleasantness, pain, humiliation, rejection, even violence, but you also know that because of what you value,

because of who you are, because you are bound to the good, you have to keep moving forward.

That's what struck me this year as I thought of Jesus on that western slope of Mt. Olive, taking in the whole view of Jerusalem, the gate to the city, the temple on the mount. This was one of those points when the whole history of creation coalesces into one moment, and what happens in that moment has cosmic implications. All of history turns on this moment. Jesus knows this. He's carrying the whole story in his head. The agency of Adam's sin. The flood and God's regret. The promise of the Lord to Abraham and Sarah. The separation of Isaac and Ismael. Slavery in Egypt. Deliverance with Moses. Golden calves and complaints in the wilderness. The preference for kings and idols over God's Lordship. Prophets. Exile. Bittersweet homecomings and subjugation to the rule of Rome. In that moment looking across to Mount Zion and the temple, Jerusalem, God's holy city, all of that history is swirling in his head.

Jesus knows something of his inevitable and immediate future if he moves forward. Jesus already knew what I pray we can begin to process and understand in these days of information saturation and

manipulation. When the truth of love's demands confronts a public not willing or able to hear it, much less like it, that public will deny it, quash it, twist it, and destroy it. If Jesus moves forward, each step leads to an inevitable and violent end. He could leave. I mean, he's Jesus; surely Jesus can make himself disappear. Let Jerusalem burn; let the people destroy what tiny remnant is left of Eden.

He could leave, and yet, he couldn't leave, could he? It would betray who he is. You see, one thing true love cannot do is contradict itself. Paul knew that, he said, "Love ... never ... fails." Jesus is going forward. So, what does Jesus do to steel himself for the refiner's fire up ahead? What gives him the courage to tell that colt to *giddy up*?

The elixir of strength is held in the words sung by the disciples along the trail, though they don't even know it. They quote Psalm 118 - "Blessed in the one who comes in the name of the Lord." And guess what? Jesus knew that psalm. Why, he had been praying that psalm for years. He knew it. That psalm had claimed him. And you know what words that psalm includes? "The steadfast love (*the hesed*) of God endures forever." And you know what else that Psalm says? "I was

pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the Lord helped me. The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation."

Don't tell me nobody knows you. Don't tell me nobody understands what you face. Don't tell me you are utterly alone. Don't tell me there is absolutely no way forward. I will in no way deny your right to feel that way or dismiss the validity of the feeling. I know it's real, but I cannot believe that it is true. Why? Because, somehow, Jesus had the strength to tell that colt to *giddy up*, and Jesus moved forward to Jerusalem and the cross so that there is no where you can go that he won't go with you; and there is nothing you can feel that he won't feel with you. For the Lord is our strength and our might; and has become our salvation.

Amen.