

LIKE A WATERED GARDEN

Out of the Garden and Into the Streets

a prompting offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
March 27-28, 2010 • Sixth Sunday in Lent (PALM SUNDAY)
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Luke 19:28-42

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes."

"As [Jesus] was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen."

Luke 19:37

Palm Sunday is the day we remember Jesus' strange ride into Jerusalem just days before his crucifixion. Traditionally, Palm Sunday services draw from all four of the Gospels. It is John's Gospel, and only John's Gospel, that contributes the "palm" branches (John 12:13); It is Matthew's Gospel that contributes the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9 (Matthew 21:5): "Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem. Lo, your king comes to you triumphant and victorious is he, humbly riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass." It is Mark's Gospel, along with Matthew and John, that contributes the shouting throng (11:8-10). But Luke's Gospel tells the story its own way, providing the reader with a slightly different understanding of the occasion. In general, it would be fair to say that Luke's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is more subdued, less crowded and less noisy, than those of the other Gospel writers.

Notice several features of Luke's story. First, verse 28 not only ties this event to what precedes it but reminds the reader that this episode is a part of the larger narrative that was begun back at chapter 9:51, that being Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. The account of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem is followed by Jesus' weeping over the city, saying "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes." (Luke 19:41-42) And following Jesus' weeping, there is his prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 19:43-44). Such a context prevents the story before us from becoming autonomous or having a life of its own without knowing the circumstance out of which this particular Sunday arose.

Second, Luke's record makes no mention of hosannas or branches cut from trees. Because those belonged commonly to nationalistic demonstrations and parades, perhaps Luke wants this event to carry no such implication. Jesus is called "King," to be sure, but Luke makes it clear very soon that the term is in no sense political or militaristic (23:2-5).

Third, and very important, the entry into Jerusalem is very much a *disciple* event rather than a burst of enthusiasm on the part of a large crowd surrounding Jesus, as in Matthew (21:8-10) and Mark (11:8-10). Notice: The disciples set Jesus on the colt; the disciples spread their garments on the road; the disciples rejoice and praise God. That this ovation is not by a general multitude in the city of the Passover festival, or gathered as result of reports about the raising of Lazarus (John 12:12) is an important detail. Jesus is praised and hailed as king by his followers, says Luke, and not by the general public.

And this is not the group, says Luke, that later called for Jesus' crucifixion. To be sure, Jesus' disciples often did not understand him, or the nature of his messiahship, but neither are they persons who sing praise and scream death within the same week. Such a portrait of a fickle crowd must be drawn from accounts other than Luke's (and perhaps way too many passion plays).

While all four gospels mention this event, and they all have a general agreement about what is happening, there is far less clarity about what it all means. Why is Jesus going to Jerusalem in the first place? What does he intend to do there? What difference does it make for us today?

I'm not sure that I have an answer for any of those questions. The symbolism, the meaning, the expectations of this day are still murky for me. But what does seem clear is that this is a planned demonstration. It is a protest march, or act of civil disobedience. In the prophetic tradition of acting out, Jesus carefully arranged for a colt to ride on and then the march was on!

And there is another thing that seems clear. Jesus has no expectation of winning once he got to town. The Gospels depict Jesus as headed to Jerusalem with the anticipation that things will end there. While some attribute divine insight for that prediction, it might be that Jesus was just a good political scientist. He saw the building controversy around his work. He heard the threats coming to him through various messengers. He knew that the Romans were most sensitive to rebellion in Jerusalem around Passover when thousands of pilgrims would be visiting the city. Or, perhaps Jesus, like Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee the night before his assassination, just sensed the time was at hand and Jerusalem would be the end of the road for him.

And so Jesus arrives in town in this symbolic and tumultuous way, a way that for some in the crowd seemed to suggest impending victory, but there is never a moment of indication that Jesus believed that. He is making this trip for reasons other than winning and losing. He is forcing a showdown for reasons other than victory and defeat. And in our world that sees everything in terms of wins and loses that may be the hardest part of this story for us to understand.

This is true for our marches in life; those causes, be they social or political, that we believe in so strongly and invest our lives in. Like the support and care for our Veterans, feeding the hungry, racial reconciliation, health care for all people, civil rights for gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgender folks, care for the environment, helping victims of domestic violence, advocating for the equality for women, basic mental health services; there are just a few of the causes that people in this church march for, work for, and fight for, give their money for, and pray for. And it is almost impossible not to think of these issues in terms of wins and losses. When you are committing your heart and soul to a just movement victory and defeat are the only categories that seem to matter.

For others here, your cause, or march, might be of a more personal nature. It might be the daily concern for a family member who is in a vulnerable position. It might be the pursuit of a goal that has eluded you for a long time. It might be a faith matter that you have struggled with what seems like forever. And in all of these cases it is easy to think in terms of winning and losing. "If I can only win this one," we say to ourselves, "life will go more smoothly." And our desperate need for a victory, and our fixation on the end result, may cause us to miss all the life that is happening right in front of us as the march goes on.

I'm not exactly sure why Jesus rode into Jerusalem that day so long ago on the back of a colt,

but it clearly wasn't to gain an immediate victory over his detractors. And the way Luke tells it, Jesus is so convinced of his message and so confident in his mission that he marches to Jerusalem almost as if he has no other choice.

And we look upon him with a mixture of admiration and horror. We admire his courage and commitment. Yet, we are horrified at what awaits him and the fact that he steps right into it. And we wonder how he can do it. How can he keep marching when there is nothing but defeat in the air?

And then we are drawn to Psalm 118, the Psalm appointed for Palm Sunday, a Psalm that may have been going through Jesus' mind as he makes that slow ride into town, which says

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord...

The Lord is God, and [God] has given us light.

Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. (Psalm 118:26-27)

These words, of course, are fitting for a Palm Sunday. But that same Psalm also says:

With God on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me?

It is better to take refuge in God than to put confidence in mortals.

It is better to take refuge in God than to put confidence in princes. (Psalm 118:6-9)

And maybe this is the answer. Maybe Jesus can keep going not because he knows he will win, but because he knows he won't be alone...that God is with him all along the way. Maybe he realizes the issue isn't ultimately winning and losing, but staying faithful and centered in God's love and grace until whatever end may come. Maybe he is convinced that nothing can happen to him in Jerusalem, or anywhere else, that will take away the importance of his cause and his march. And when you get to that place in life you have suddenly shifted into a different realm. For in that place we don't care as much about what others may think, and we don't worry so much about the obstacles and the enemies, and our vision gets stronger and our passion goes deeper. And as people of faith, people who march all kinds of personal and social and political causes, this is the place we seek. *That* place where we know we are not alone. *That* place where the commitment to the cause is so much bigger than if we win or lose. *That* place where we see and experience God in the ordinary and the extraordinary. *That* place where a strange peace comes over us even as the defeats pile up left and right.

My friends, are you weary from the march? Are you tired of losing in life? Are you tired of working for justice and change with little or no results? See this Jesus riding into town on the back of a colt. See the defeat that awaits him. And see that fact that he doesn't care! Jesus has left the garden of safety and familiarity. He has taken to the streets. It was a risky and dangerous move.

Barbara Battin shared a song with me written by Dorie Ellzey, an acquaintance of hers. We tried our best to find the music, but were unsuccessful. Barbara wrote the words down for me as best she could, from memory! The song is called "Out of the Garden." The song gets to heart of where I think Jesus is on his strange Palm Sunday ride. He's moved out of the garden and into the streets! Oddly, it was the title of my sermon that prompted Barbara to think of this song. I've never heard it sung, but I imagine it being sung in a "blues-y" sort of way:

*Somebody help me I am out of the garden,
I am on my own and I feel so lost.*

*I couldn't help it, I was driven along by something,
telling me to move at almost any cost.
I can't go back now, I can only stumble along;
I'm in the water and the bathtub is gone.*

*Roles, rules and reasons I have said goodbye now,
Well, it's time to die now, but I'm here to stay.*

*I couldn't help it, I was driven along by something,
telling me to move at almost any cost.
I can't go back now, I can only stumble along;
I'm in the water and the bathtub is gone."*

I am wondering today, where do you find yourself in this story? Where are we as a faith community? Maybe some of us can identify with Jesus. He certainly, clearly, illustrates what happens when a person claims who he is – when a person declares her vision and convictions openly, when a person risks it all for God's justice and love.

All along Jesus had done the hard work of defining himself – not as others wanted him to be and do, but as he before God believed he was to be and to do. To be ourselves, to offer ourselves boldly, to do the hard work of justice, to risk love, is always costly. We see it all so clearly in Jesus. His integrity cost his life. That is obvious.

And the more painful part may have been the hurt he brought to others. We can certainly identify with Jesus here. His courageous stand for who he was and what he believed God to be had such consequences for others he loved – the suicide of Judas, the forced, painful choices among his closest friends, the heartbreak of Mary, his mother. Jesus was upfront about it all along. There is a cost in being a disciple. During Holy Week we see it played out so vividly.

But we are not Jesus. To identify with Jesus requires caution. To think we are Jesus tempts us with a dangerous self-righteousness. I'm not saying we shouldn't try to be like Jesus. I'm not saying that we shouldn't try with all our might to follow in this way. I am just offering a caution about identifying with him too quickly in the story.

Maybe some of us identify more readily with the established groups. They are there, if not explicitly in the text, then definitely behind the text – the religious Pharisees, the political Sadducees, the domineering Romans – all those threatened by this man of Galilee, this revealer of God, this friend of sinners and outcasts, this prince of Shalom (Peace), this apostle of nonviolence, this lover of enemies. More than we might care to admit, we can identify with the good people who had so much to protect; we can see ourselves as the responsible people preferring order and security over change and risk. We can understand their anger against Jesus, this light shining in the darkness. We can understand wanting to blow out his candle. We don't like Jesus shining light in our eyes. Crucify him! Snuff out the candle. Or, at least, pretty him up a bit, domesticate him, make him one of us. We certainly know how to play this part and we play it at one time or another.

But emotionally, I think I am identifying most with the stones crying out. As Jesus entered Jerusalem, the disciples “began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen.” The Pharisees anxiously urged Jesus to silence them. “Why,” Jesus answered, “if I silenced them, these very stones would cry out.”

Have you ever considered identifying with a crying out stone?! Along with the threat of Jesus, there is in this story an irrepressible joy that demands expression. Because of Jesus, you and I have seen some mighty works – some amazing grace – that stirs us to unrestrained gratitude. Just think, if it were not for Jesus, most of us would never have known each other. Cross Creek Community Church would not be a part of our experience. We have seen in Jesus' name people give up controlling people and trying to conform people to their image to just loving people for who they are and where they find them. We have seen people give up being God, or trying to be God, to simply loving God with heart and head and hands. We have seen people struggle courageously with the question of the historical Jesus – Who was he? What was Jesus like? Who was God to him? And what should be our response? We have seen people struggle to appropriate a more progressive Christian theology in a landscape dominated by fundamentalism and traditionalism. It is amazing to behold and to be a part of such transformation. It is awesome to watch old dogma and tired religion give way to the new thing that God is doing in our day and in our midst.

You and I have been privileged to many wondrous works – persons, who in Jesus' name, have come to know they are loved without condition or limits...persons who have released enormous hurt through forgiveness...persons who have found healing and wholeness and abundant life amidst some pretty crappy situations and despairing diagnosis...persons who with Jesus as their model, did not cling to status or privilege but emptied themselves, taking on the form of a

servant...persons who have found a freedom in truth seeking and truth telling...persons who have moved from concern about right belief to an actual experience of God in the here and now, in the ordinariness of life...persons inspired by Jesus to live boldly in spite of great odds knowing that grace abounds.

We don't own any of this. We can't possess any of it. We can't even store in box for safe keeping. But we do get to experience God's power every now and then. We do get to glimpse it's goodness and power every now and then with our own eyes. And that is enough! That is enough to capture our attention, to demand our discipleship, to cull forth our praise!

Why if somehow our praise and thanksgiving were silenced...if somehow clamps sealed our lips, these very walls would shout for joy, the bricks of this building would cry out the praise – because there's joy in the gospel that cannot be silenced.

I am with William James on this one:

“I am done with great things and big plans, great institutions and big success.
I am for those tiny, invisible loving human forces that work from individual to individual, creeping through the crannies of the world like so many rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, which, if given time, will rend the hardest monuments of pride.”

There is good news in the Jesus way that is irrepressible. There is a power and goodness of God that continues to be experienced and seen and known. There is gratitude that will be shouted in a loud voice – if not from us, from someone, from somewhere.

Let it be from us! Amen.