

Shout Out

Luke 19:28-40

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At a pre-concert lecture, the conductor of a symphony orchestra was telling the audience about the major work that the orchestra would be performing at that evening's concert. The conductor told the people that if they listened carefully to the music, they would discover that it was both surprising and inevitable. On the one hand, the musical score would take a fair number of rather jarring and unexpected twists. There would be points in the concert when the blare of the trumpet or the sudden rolling of the timpani would seem to come from out of nowhere in a surprising fashion. On the other hand, however, the conductor noted that in the long run, these surprises would themselves become part of a larger coherence. Once listeners heard the entire piece from start to finish, they would find in the music an air of inevitability--how could it ever have been written any differently?

Surprising and inevitable. Palm Sunday and the events of Holy Week are both surprising and inevitable. The truth is that we are not completely sure what to make of Palm Sunday. After forty days of Lenten travel that have often focused on serious and sometimes dark subjects, suddenly we arrive at a day that seems at first blush to be surprisingly cheery. The Palm Sunday parade has color and spectacle, cheering and singing, festive voices and joyful exuberance. This seems like a happy day. Yet it would be completely appropriate if we were to ask, "What in the world is this day doing here given how close we are now to the cross!?" Is Palm Sunday a bright spot in the midst of the otherwise darker hues of Lent? Are we, for just a little while this morning, supposed to forget about all things dreary so that we can shout out some full-throated "Hosannas!?" Or is there also a sadness to this day that we must bear in mind?

All four gospels tell the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem to welcoming shouts from exultant crowds. However, each gospel records a variety of details that may vary from one to the next. The account Jane read for us today from Luke's gospel makes no mention of palm branches. Luke does, however, include a fascinating detail not mentioned by Matthew, Mark or John. He is speaking to some of the Pharisees in the crowd who said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." They wanted Jesus to quiet the multitude of the disciples who were praising God joyfully with loud voices. They want the crowd to hush. Perhaps they think the moment is too political and the empire will retaliate. Or they may disagree with the inference that Jesus is the Messiah. We cannot say for sure. Whatever their reason, the Pharisees cannot restrain the crowd. On a day like this, it would be like requesting the church choir to forget about singing Faure's "The Palms!" Not going to happen.

Jesus' reply is "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." This could be a reference to the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. It could also be a reference to Psalm 148, which makes the claim that all creation praises God. This causes one to wonder if Luke is saying Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem on this day is an event so epic in scale that, even if we silence human voices, we cannot silence the rest of God's creation.

For all of its joyful hosannas, though, Palm Sunday is a day of contrasts.

Go with me now to the year 1942. The first American troops are marching into London. We are entering the conflict known as World War II. The people of London are cheering the American soldiers. The friendly reception exhilarates the young soldiers. They sing as they march. Suddenly the troops turn onto a main street and a strange hush falls over the scene. The happy songs die on their lips. They are looking for the first time upon an area in London that has been blown to bits. They see the great wounds on the city inflicted by falling bombs. They suddenly realize the city has suffered terribly. In these young soldiers' hearts, one moment celebration; the next, great sadness.

Today is called not just Palm Sunday, but also Passion Sunday. The contrasts are evident in the triumph and the tragedy. Palm Sunday. Good Friday. In order for us to fully appreciate the empty tomb, and the shouts of, "He is Risen!" which will roll off our tongues next week, we also must consider the events which happen between now and then.

In just a matter of days Holy Week takes us from the mountain of festive palms to the mountain of Golgatha's despair. And that is why we resist it so. I mean, do we really need the emotional rollercoaster of Holy Week? What's so wrong with just jumping from one parade to the next and skipping all the sacrifice and death stuff? What's wrong with simply moving on to the joy of Easter, with its white bonnets, Easter eggs, family, friends, big ham dinner, and of course the empty tomb.

Well, I think we know the answer to that. For starters, an empty tomb, at face value, is a lot easier to deal with than a tortured and dying Savior on a cross. Add to that all the pain and suffering that comes with Holy Week, is it any wonder that the human tendency is to try and ignore the events of the week and simply move on to the Easter celebration? But as much as we'd like to skip Holy Week we know that the only way to Easter is through the cross. We know where the parade of Palm Sunday leads and we also know that **we** are part of that parade. That is to say, we know this intellectually. Our hearts are another story. Our hearts may be more in sync with the disciples and the fear and disbelief that led them to run away. It would seem that 2000 years later Jesus' disciples are still running away.

From what are we running?

There is so much that troubles us in this life. As people of faith, we know we're supposed to praise God, and often we do! Yet, sometimes we don't understand, we get angry, we object to what is going on for us or for those around us or in the world in general. Sometimes we are filled with anguish and grief. Jesus and his disciples felt all of those things over the course of this week we call holy. The book of Ecclesiastes tells us that there is a time for everything. All of our shouts, the ones of praise and the ones of lament are appropriate and important to God.

The Western Wall is a place in the Old City section of Jerusalem which is one of the last remaining walls of the Temple Mount, the elevated plaza that was the site of both ancient Jewish temples. It is considered the holiest and most significant site for the Jewish faith. Millions of pilgrims, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, make their way to the Western Wall each year to pray. Guess what the wall is made out of? You guessed it, stone. Limestone to be exact. It is also known as the Wailing Wall. My experience there was an incredible one, especially because I happened to go on a Friday night, just after sunset which begins Shabbat. The plaza next to the wall was crowded

with people. Some were dancing and singing, shouting out praises to God. Some were shouting out cries of grief and anguish. Some were kneeling or prostrated in prayer. Some had their hands on the wall itself, or were tucking their prayers into cracks in the wall. The energy was frenetic. It sparks my imagination to think about what we might hear shouted out from those stones. After all, if those stones could talk, they could tell of the river of tears and blood spilled here and there as the result of any number of brutal campaigns. They could tell of one military leader after another parading into the city and filling the people's ears with fear. The stinging stone's song on the day Jesus entered the city would sing, not just for joy at the coming a gracious king, but also for grief and lamentation. Their song would be a cry rushing from any street of broken dreams across this planet where God's people have suffered.

Today, when we wave our palms and boldly shout out, "Hosanna," do we dare imagine what we really want God to save us from? Save us from anger. Save us from cancer. Save us from anxiety and depression. Save us from debt. Save us from the strife in our family. Save us from boredom. Save us from the realities of war. Save us from the endless cycle of violence. Save us from injustice. Save us from oppression. Save us from humiliation, guilt and shame. Save us from regret and resentment. Save us from staring at the ceiling at three a.m. wondering why we exist. Save us from bitterness. Save us from arrogance. Save us from loneliness. Save us from grief. Save us from pain. Save us, God, save us from our insecurities and our fears. These shouts are ones of lament. Our wordless shouts are even welcome for we know that the Spirit will intercede with sighs too deep for words (Romans 8:26).

In viewing Palm Sunday from that angle, we can begin to see the potential for some real depth in this celebration, for embedded in our quaint pageantry is an appeal to God that originates in the most vulnerable places inside of us; and it bubbles, almost beyond our control, to the surface. "Hosanna." "Save us." Please God take the broken places that will tear us apart and make them whole. We beseech you, God, jump into the water and drag our almost-drowned selves to shore. "Save us." "Hosanna."

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