

Sermon “From Palms to Stones”
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Olivet Congregational Church, UCC
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SCRIPTURE Luke 19:28-40

Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

28 After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

29 When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰saying, ‘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. ³¹If anyone asks you, “Why are you untying it?” just say this: “The Lord needs it.” ’ ³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, ‘Why are you untying the colt?’ ³⁴They said, ‘The Lord needs it.’ ³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷As 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, ³⁸saying, ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!’ ³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop.’ ⁴⁰He answered, ‘I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.’

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It’s Palm Sunday. We have our palms. We raise them and shout Hosanna. Yet in this gospel from Luke, there are no palms, no Hosannas. But there are crowds. Those who are cheering are calling Jesus the king who comes in the name of the Lord and are calling for Heavenly Peace. Amidst the cheering crowd, there are Pharisees who are warning Jesus against this parade. And there are stones.

Today we recall the irony of it all, that Jesus, the Messiah, enters the city on a colt – not a majestic steed that would be befitting of a King. No majesty for the Prince of Peace. He is surrounded by fisherman, his disciples, and people who he healed, people who have heard his stories, people whose lives he touched, who have become his followers.

And the Pharisees warn him about this parade toward Jerusalem, for this time of Passover celebration. They warn him that the Romans will be angry about his popularity and his parade. As Jesus approaches Jerusalem, Pilate would also be on his way into Jerusalem on his steed with his army. He would be on his way into Jerusalem to keep the people in line, not to celebrate the Passover. The Pharisees confirm that Jesus has reason to be afraid.

But Jesus tells the Pharisees that the stones would cry out if the people didn't. Stones are inanimate objects but none the less, part of God's creation. Creation cries out in all its glory, praising the God who loves this world. Creation cries out even when people are silent.

Jesus would not be intimidated. He would not be detoured from his mission. As Jesus enters Jerusalem, it is all irony, not unlike the radical, upside down world Jesus had preached throughout his life.

Amidst joy and celebration Jesus rides toward Jerusalem, only to weep.

In the next verse of Luke's Gospel, Jesus weeps for Jerusalem. Jesus laments, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day, the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes..." Jesus laments and will weep in sadness.

Amidst joy and celebration Jesus rides toward Jerusalem, where he will act in anger, clearing the money changers from the temple and upsetting the economic system.

Amidst joy and celebration Jesus rides toward Jerusalem, where he will become the stone that is rejected, where he will become the object of ridicule.

Amidst joy and celebration Jesus rides toward Jerusalem, where he will celebrate a Passover meal with his friends who will desert and betray him.

Amidst joy and celebration Jesus rides toward Jerusalem, where soldiers will mock him and tear his garments, and people will yell, "Crucify him."

Amidst joy and celebration Jesus rides toward Jerusalem, where the Prince of Peace will be hung on a cross to die like a common criminal. Considered an enemy of the state, he will be on display to discourage others from being like him, to discourage them from being his followers who try to change the world where the kingdom is based on God's love.

Irony and reversal are the story of this terrible, yet, Holy Week.

Jesus knows where he is going, what is ahead. Yet he rides on into Jerusalem where he will weep for Jerusalem, for the people there, for his friends, and for us. And he would also forgive them and us for those times we have deserted him, failed at living the love that he exemplified.

Jesus knew that his mission would include his death but he knew that he was not alone. He knew that his God would be with him. He understood that God's steadfast love endures forever.

Jesus' disciples sang his praises on the road to Jerusalem, and Jesus would not silence them. He knew the risks of being noticed. Jesus had been noticed for all the works he had done, for all he had preached about the kingdom – God's kingdom, where God loves and forgives extravagantly, where Samaritans, a Roman Centurian, a syrophonecian woman, women in general, those suffering from physical and mental illness, even tax collectors and sinners were welcome – all are welcome and loved. And Jesus had especially been noticed for raising Lazarus from the dead, which made him an even greater threat to the empire. But Jesus wanted to be known for his radical love and all that he did, even if it upset the status quo and the rule of the occupying establishment. He wanted people to know of God's kin-dom of love. And God's steadfast love strengthened him.

As we enter into this Holy Week, we recall that

Jesus celebrates a sacred meal and feeds his disciples with a new covenant,

Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, even the one who will betray him, and gives them a mandate to do as he has done,

Jesus weeps in a garden, amidst the glory of creation.

Jesus is betrayed and deserted by his friends, carries his cross, is nailed to it and dies on it but forgives those who deserted him, crucified him, and sin against him, even us.

Jesus did not have to make that journey. He could have wept for Jerusalem but then said, 'You are an obstinate people, you do not deserve mercy or forgiveness.' But he didn't.

Jesus could have refused to wash the feet of the one he knew would betray him. But he didn't.

Jesus could have wept in that garden and said, 'Take this cup, Father. Really, I don't want to do this. Let's find another way.' But he didn't.

But he didn't. He chose the struggle and the pain because of love for us. Love empowered Jesus – the love of the Father and his love for us.

As we enter this Holy Week, we reflect on what Jesus experienced and what that means for us.

We might ask ourselves if there are struggles that we enter out of love, where we die to ourselves in some way yet experience a rebirth in ourselves or a rebirth of love. We might ask how we are followers of Jesus.

Do we care for those we love, even when it is difficult or inconvenient?

Do we care for those we don't like, even when they anger us?

Do we cry out against injustice as individuals and as a church?

Do we welcome the stranger and those who are different than us; who think differently, who are a different color, who believe differently, who love differently or see their gender differently?

Do we work for the peace that Jesus demonstrated – a peace based on love, forgiveness, righteousness, nonviolence and justice; a peace that is achieved through addressing the underlying hate, fear, and ignorance that begets violence?

Do we trust that our God is on our journeys with us, that God's steadfast love is with us in the midst of our joys and our struggles, in this life and when we die?

Jesus knew he had to die to experience resurrection. He had to face the cross and the tomb before he could conquer death and roll away the stone. The journey was not easy. But the steadfast love of God was with Jesus all the way. It endures all things and endures forever. The steadfast love of God is with us all our days.

So let us wave our palms. Let us shout hosanna. Let stones remind us the creation cries out to glorify God. Let us enter into this terrible, holy week taking time out to reflect on the steps of our Lord, the steps we have taken through our Lenten journeys, and the steps we will take in the coming week. Let us glorify our suffering Savior, whose radical love resulted in his death on a cross, with our words and our acts of love. Let us give praise and thanks to our Savior whose radical love conquered death for all. Let us roll away the stones that prevent us from loving as Jesus would have us love. Let us love.