

Flash in the Dark

Menno Mennonite Church

April 13, 2025

Purpose: To explore the startling aspects of the events that bring us toward the cross.

Message: Even in the familiarity of that which we have known, God meets us with more than what we expect.

Scripture: Luke 19:29-44 (I will read); Psalm 31:9-16

Synopsis: Palm Sunday is a snapshot with all sorts of details captured all at once. The entry of the declared king. The prophetic and messianic symbolism. The kingly implications of the ways and means of his entry. The tears shed for the fuller implications of where all this would in time lead. All of this and more in the same tableau. In encountering all of these things we are asked to step alongside Christ into what is next, knowing the shadows even as we anticipate the coming dawn.

Luke 19: 29-44

²⁹ As Jesus came to Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives, he gave two disciples a task.

³⁰ He said, “Go into the village over there.
When you enter it,
you will find tied up there a colt that no one has ever ridden.
Untie it and bring it here.

³¹ If anyone asks, ‘Why are you untying it?’
just say, ‘Its master needs it.’ ”

³² Those who had been sent found it exactly as he had said.

³³ As they were untying the colt,
its owners said to them,
“Why are you untying the colt?”

³⁴ They replied, “Its master needs it.”

³⁵ They brought it to Jesus,
threw their clothes on the colt,
and lifted Jesus onto it.

³⁶ As Jesus rode along, they spread their clothes on the road.

³⁷ As Jesus approached the road
leading down from the Mount of Olives,
the whole throng of his disciples began rejoicing.

They praised God with a loud voice
because of all the mighty things they had seen.

³⁸ They said,
“Blessings on the king who comes in the name of the Lord.
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heavens.”

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees from the crowd said to Jesus,

“Teacher, scold your disciples! Tell them to stop!”

⁴⁰ He answered,
“I tell you, if they were silent, the stones would shout.”

⁴¹ As Jesus came to the city and observed it, he wept over it.

⁴² He said, “If only you knew on this of all days
the things that lead to peace.
But now they are hidden from your eyes.

⁴³ The time will come when your enemies
will build fortifications around you,
encircle you, and attack you from all sides.

⁴⁴ They will crush you completely,
you and the people within you.
They won’t leave one stone on top of another within you,
because you didn’t recognize the time of your gracious visit from God.”

Palm Sunday and its telling of the triumphal entry is a good deal like a flashbulb going off in a dark room. You know what it is like: you are well adjusted to a dark space, your eyes having finally adjusted when somebody thinks it is a great time to take a picture. Or worse still, you get someone with a stand alone flash where they can get things strobing repeatedly (an admittedly favor prank of mine, I must admit). Everyone sort of groans with the physicality of it. But in the moment of the flash you get the frozen vision of clarity and position—the whole room coming back to instantaneous life. The color and the contrast is thrown into relief. Everyone's mode, motion and position are frozen in time as you sear the scene against the back of your eyeballs. With all this in mind, it begins to fade almost as fast as it came on in the first place as your eyes re-adjust and the darkness now broken is that much more completely dark.

In many ways Luke's telling of the triumphal entry is a good deal like this flash experience. For a shining moment we see what we expect to see on a day like today, the Sunday School version of the coming of the one in the name of the Lord. But it does not last. Not for long. Like a flash it fades away and is all that much more dark than it was before. It may not be where we want to be, but it is a realistic thing all the same. Truth be told, this scene and its surroundings are already foreboding in their aspect and are likely best cast with shadowy darker hues in our cinematic minds' sets. It is not what you likely came here for today. It is rarely a great theme on which to preach, but I want to give you something in particular: we need the darkness, the discomfort, the apprehension of this moment of arriving at Jerusalem every bit as much as we need the cheery parade, especially if we are trying to understand the movement and the moment of what is going on here.

The challenge of this day is to get our image as fresh as possible. We really need to take a few steps back from the mental image that we each likely carried into the sanctuary and try to consider what Luke is actually showing us. For instance, were Luke the only gospel we had available to us to reference these times, we would likely not be here on Palm Sunday. Maybe Coat Sunday but not palm as it simply does not come up here. Gone too would be the image of yelling children—they are not here either. Hosanna would also not likely not be in vocabulary—that's gone here too. We might even wonder what all this was about as, realistically, the only crowd mentioned here were those numbered among his disciples, whether they were the select 12 or the larger entourage of those who traveled alongside the teacher.

This is not the entrance as we know it, nor how we see it. Our best association of this arrival on the scene would be the red carpet affair of those swells coming to be among the other rich and famous striding down the red carpet with cameras popping. Think Hollywood or other swanky affairs with people stopping for autographs and selfies in front of the adoring crowd. That's what we envision because that is what we know as the stuff of power and prestige: making the scene when you know that everyone likes you.

But that is not what we actually are given, and not, I contend what is actually going on. From the parade on down this is something else entirely. Jesus rides a colt, not a stallion of fully grown horse. You can almost see his feet drag as he goes along the patchwork road laid out by those with him whatever came to hand. They look far more like a bunch of kids playing dress up than they do a proper, royal, arrival: perhaps more like the neighborhood kids with bathrobes and a lawn chair than necessarily the thing it self. Luke vision is portraying the discord at work here. He is setting a stage for the coming conflict far more than he is bringing Jesus in to victory. There is joy here—of course there is. The declarations of the disciples that distressed the pharisees so much had to be said lest nature itself takes up the song (we are not sure if it was noise or the things that they were saying that could cause trouble).

Leaning into this Lukan way of thinking, I am not merely trying to disassemble our way of seeing Palm Sunday. I think it is really the way that Luke sees it, and a way that we do well to take on from time to time. It is useful for us to remember that there is much that goes into the passion narrative and not all of it is sweetness and light. As you know, I am fond of saying: we cannot go from celebration to celebration without going first into the dark, at least a little bit, to better understand the world that we then inherit and the kingdom in whom we then reside.

The first shadow we are given is the context. We don't catch it unless you jump a few verses back before the reading this morning. Luke 19:11-27 is Luke's telling of the parable of the servants trusted with the investment, or, as might be more importantly and contextually framed, the parable of the king with demanding expectations and standards that are higher skill. It is not enough. We know this story from elsewhere, But Luke's telling throws in further intrigue about a demanding King and those who opposed him. He ends the story not only stripping the overcautious servant of what he had in punishment but also calling for those who spoke in opposition to him to be brought before him and slaughtered as enemies. Little wonder we don't often use this part of Luke for teaching and edification. Luke 19:28 kicks off the

Triumphal entry with “after he said these things.... He went to Jerusalem. In Luke’s orderly account of the life and times of Jesus Christ he leaves the image of a ruthless and powerful king hanging in the air right as Jesus commits some grand-theft-colt and enters the capital. When we hear “Blessed is the KING who come in the name of the Lord” we have to wonder precisely what sort of king they might have in mind. Likely it was the image that they just heard rather than anything else.

Because after all, isn’t that precisely the kind of messianic king the people had been looking for all along? Luke is the author who, in the first chapter of Acts, will show us that even as late as the day of Jesus’ ascension into heaven (a full forty days after Easter), even then the disciples were still asking the political question about when Jesus was going to kick out the Romans, smash Pilate, Herod, and the Caesar in the teeth, and restore the physical kingdom to Israel alone. If that is how they were thinking even after the cross and resurrection, they surely had something like that in mind on what we call Palm Sunday. The kind of king the disciples caught a glimpse of in the parable is the same kind of powerful political figure they had in mind as they shouted their blessings as Jesus rode that colt.

All of this lends that much more context to the tears shed for Jerusalem’s inability to assess and understand what true power actually looks like and the things are the *actually* make for peace. He is carrying this disconnect between the worldly power of might and majesty and the Godly power of sacrificial love on his shoulders and there was a sure understanding that it would not be understood for what it was. There are few quicker ways to crash a party then to begin with the weeping. There is not much of the kingly in that. Yet it is the surety of the basic misunderstanding of what it is to actually live within the way of YHWH, to trust God’s hope and presence. It is this shadow of darkness and the future that it portends—a future we know comes true time and again—is that which brings Jesus to tears for the senseless of it all. This is a prediction with its graphic realism that holds within it the failures of the human expectation and divine intention to meet up for what true leadership looks like.

Yet notice: once Jesus is done crying and picks himself up, he makes it clear that this vision is not a happenstance that would come to Jerusalem because it simply had bad luck. This was because they could not tell time or have a sense of the messiah when he came to them. As tempting as it is to say that they just got it right with all their acclamations and adulation but that is not the case. Nor is it simply that they see fit in a matter of days to execute him rather than

allow him to continue to be a menace. Jesus' point is at that very moment, even in the very celebration they had just held for Jesus, they were more wrong than they were right. They had all the wrong ideas about what kind of king Jesus was and how Jesus would accomplish a mission that, in the end, would have nothing to do with politics or power as this world knows it.

The gospel is this: in a world obsessed with power and money, with prestige and politics, with manipulation and the end results justifying whatever means necessary, we as Christians are invited to look far more like kids playing dress up than yet another power set. We are invited into the way that Jesus sets. Try though we might to make Jesus the strong man we know what to do with, he won't stay in that box. Not then, not now, not ever. In a world that only the beautiful people grab the headlines we follow a servant king who knew the mercy of seeing the world not from the top down, but from the bottom up. We are invited to the path that invites us, challenges us, demands of us a different way; a far different way. A perhaps dangerous way.

The more we turn Palm Sunday in to a red carpet gala the more we forget that we follow Jesus away from the carpets, away from the power, away from the notions of my way or the highway, and toward the path most believe only to be a dead end going nowhere. Like the servants in the parable who received riches from the king, so we have been given the riches of the gospel. We dare not squander it or bury it under some spiritual mattress. But likewise we dare not try to turn the gospel treasure into something it isn't and so find ourselves, like the people of Jerusalem, both expecting and also promoting all the wrong things.

This week Jesus leads us, and asks us but to follow. You likely didn't come today seeking the Palm Sunday Jesus with tear-stained cheeks. But it is the Jesus we follow and the one we take out of here. For this is the reality of the Gospel: the costly kingdom is now, and there is no place we can go in the week or any other time where God is not.

May we follow as we may