

Irony

Luke 19:28-40

April 14, 2019

We stand at the head of Holy Week, a week that begins with hosannas of Palm Sunday and ends with the hallelujahs of Easter, a journey from joy to joy.

But it is not an easy journey. We get from here to there, we can only get from here to there, by way of Maundy Thursday, by way of the shock and betrayal and abandonment of Maundy Thursday. And we get from here to there, we can only get from here to there, by way of the horror and darkness and emptiness of Good Friday. The journey from life to life is not an easy one, for Jesus or for us.

But today is Palm Sunday, the head of the week, a most enigmatic day. It's a day filled with excitement, but also an undercurrent of foreboding. The crowds joyfully welcome the one they call king, but he chooses deliberately to enter the city riding humbly on a donkey's colt. They are loud and effusive, he is quiet and subdued. Palm Sunday is a day filled with contradictions. Palm Sunday is a day filled with irony.

The parade wasn't planned. Jesus' disciples procured the donkey's colt at his request, but they didn't recruit the crowds. It just happened. The people just came, flocking to Jesus as he rode toward the city. John's gospel says they came because of Lazarus, because they had seen that startling miracle or had heard tell of it. Luke simply says they came because of "all the great things that they had seen."

All the great things. They had seen enough, they had heard enough. Enough to believe. Enough to believe that this man came to them from God, came from God for them. Enough to believe that the time was near when they would be saved, when their nation would be restored at last, when their dignity would be given back to them, when their disgrace as a people would be lifted from them, when the Lord would set them free again just as he once brought their ancestors out of slavery in Egypt. The crowd of disciples saw the edge of the promise. They were filled with hope, believing that the moment had come at last when everything would be changed.

I remember a November night eleven years ago when 240,000 people gathered in Grant Park in Chicago to celebrate a victory and welcome a new leader promising hope and promising change. I remember the images, the images of the faces, dark faces, African-American faces, tears streaming down their faces. Regardless of what this man would or would not accomplish in office, regardless of what this man did or did not accomplish in office, for a whole race of people that night was a watershed moment. The way things always had been wasn't anymore. It was a day of new possibilities, for black people, but also for all Americans. It was a day of a new reality, when things would never be the same again. It was a day of promise.

That's the way Jesus' followers felt that day as they watched him ride toward the city. The way things always had been, the way things seemed to have to be, didn't have to be anymore. Things would never be the same. They saw the edge of the promise, because Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. "God bless the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory to God!"

But Jesus gave no speeches and if he acknowledged the cheering crowds, the gospel writers don't report it. Mark's gospel says merely that Jesus entered the city, "went into the Temple, and looked around at everything." Jesus is quiet, subdued, introspective. He surely believes the promise as much as they do, but he knows far better than they do what it will take to deliver on that promise.

It is a day of irony, Jesus surrounded by adoring people, but never more alone.

The city Jesus entered was Jerusalem, the city of David, the holy city, the city built on a hill, the city intended by God's call to be a light to the world, the city, the prophets say, to which all nations will come seeking justice and righteousness and peace. Jerusalem is meant to be a place of living witness to a living God, to a living God of mercy, slow to anger and full of constant love, a God whose desire and whose way is nothing less than joy for all God's people, joy for all creation.

That is what Jerusalem was meant to be. But there were moneychangers in the Temple and whitewashed sepulchers in the pulpits. Justice and mercy were set aside for ritual and legalism. There were no more prophets, only priests, priests and rabbis dedicated not to transformation, but to preservation, preserving the tradition, preserving their livelihoods, preserving themselves.

In Jerusalem, God was not still speaking, or at least God's people had long stopped listening. In Jerusalem, God was not still doing. Oh, yes, they prayed for the peace of Jerusalem, but they didn't actually expect God to do anything. They took up the slack where God left off by doing their best to keep things quiet and under control. They did their best to keep themselves safe by not posing any kind of threat to Rome.

It's was Rome's light, Rome's way, the way of power and wealth and empire, that filled their hearts and minds, not God's way, the way of humility and sacrifice and love. Jerusalem, the holy city, the city meant to be a place of living witness to the living God, instead silences God's witnesses and kills God's prophets. And Jerusalem killed Jesus.

Friends, do not miss the irony. May we not substitute self-preservation for justice. May we not care more about personal security than love. May we not turn a living, breathing, ever-changing, ever-growing faith into some kind of frozen relic, some kind of pacifier to soothe us in the midst of a daunting world. The church is not meant to be a place to which we come for safe retreat from the world, but a place from which we are sent out to love God by changing the world, changing the world by loving our neighbors, all our neighbors, in real and risky ways.

We are called together here, not to protect and preserve the way of life we already have, but to be living witnesses to the way of life that will be when God's kingdom comes, when God's will is done.

They didn't see it -- the Pharisees. They told Jesus to order his disciples to be quiet. They didn't see hope, they saw disturbing the peace. They didn't see the edge of the promise, they saw a looming threat. They didn't see a messenger from God, they saw impudence, heresy, blasphemy. They didn't see the kairos, the moment on which the course of history itself hung in the balance.

Jesus answered: "I tell you that if they keep quiet, the stones themselves will start shouting." Friends, this is not hyperbole! This is not a metaphor! Jesus means what he says. He means the stones themselves will start shouting!

Because all of creation waits with eager longing for God to set it free from its slavery to decay! All of creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth. All of creation is on alert waiting for God to come. Isn't it?

But they don't see it. They don't see what is at stake here. The fate of humanity, the fate of the world, the fate of God's promise, their own fate is at stake. They think this is about one pesky rabbi whose popularity has gotten a little bit out of control. It is a day of irony.

There is one more irony. On this day when the future of humanity hangs in the balance, on this day when our own future hangs in the balance, there is nothing we can do. Later there will be much we can do. Later there will be much we must do. But on this day, there is nothing we can do.

We cannot go where Jesus goes. We cannot do what Jesus does. We cannot walk the path of obedience all the way to death and we cannot die to take away the sins of the world, let alone our own sins. We cannot fulfill the promise.

But Jesus can and Jesus will. Jesus will fulfill the promise. Jesus will walk the path of obedience all the way to death. Jesus will die, innocently executed, because of jealousy, because of fear, because of shame, because of despair. And in dying he will swallow up jealousy in humility. He will swallow up fear in love. He will swallow up shame in forgiveness. And he will swallow up despair in a hope that does not disappoint. Jesus will die ... for us, for all of us, for the world.

That is gospel. That is good news.

The purpose of this week is to remind us of gospel, to remind us that the heart of our faith is grace, not what we must do to please God, but what God has done for us out of God's own good pleasure. The heart of our faith is love, God's love, God's love for us, God's love for this beautiful and fragile earth, God's love for all us beautiful and flawed creatures. God comes to us, in Jesus, to set us and all creation free from the laws of sin and death. So we can live! So we can live well! So we can live well and be well and make well!

May the Lord be with you, may the Lord be with me, as we make the journey
this week from life to life.