

Luke 19:28-44

What Could Possibly Go Wrong?

March 28, 2021

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Scripture

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, ³⁰ 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. ³¹ If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” ³² So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ³⁴ They said, “The Lord needs it.” ³⁵ Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ 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, ³⁸ saying,

“Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!”

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” ⁴⁰ He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

⁴¹ As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, ⁴² 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. ⁴³ Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you

and surround you and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴ They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.” (NRSV)

Sermon

What could possibly go wrong? Generally, a rhetorical question and if I ask it, the answer already formed in my mind is, “Everything.” So, when I heard my colleague, Rev. Hemm’s sermon from last Sunday, which ended with, “What could possibly go wrong?” I instantly thought, “Everything.” The sermon was a cool monologue from the perspective of James, one of Jesus’ disciples. Rev. Hemm imagined that James was having one of the best days of his life as he watched Jesus coming into Jerusalem that day. James was excited, to say the least.

He was excited that finally the kingdom of God Jesus had been talking about would come to be. The oppression of the people of Israel at the hands of the Romans would finally come to an end. They would no longer be at their mercy. They would have a king of their own. A king appointed by God, a king who would take care of them. And the religious leaders would finally see that that they didn’t have to fear Jesus’ teachings, that he was saying wasn’t dangerous to tradition, in fact, he understood tradition better than most. He understood that the covenant between God and God’s people was meant to be a blessing to all people and not just the ones who had the privilege of being able to strictly adhere to temple purity codes. With Jesus in charge, there would be enough for everyone and everything that was wrong would, at last, be made right, for he was the Messiah for whom they had hoped. What could possibly go wrong?

I can’t help but wonder, if the disciples really thought the end result would be Jesus as king, how exactly did they think that was going to happen? I mean...based on what we know about the Roman Empire (or

any powerful Empire), there is no reason to think it could happen without violence. Is that what Jesus was planning? Is that what his followers thought was about to happen? Were they marching into Jerusalem to fight, to stage an insurrection? If so, then the answer to the question, “What could possibly go wrong?” is, again, “Everything.” Everything goes wrong when human beings inflict violence on one another. And as Luke’s story moves along this week, we will see that, in fact, everything does go wrong.

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem was the thing his followers had been waiting for. Finally, Jesus wasn’t shushing them. It was all playing out in front of them, it was just as they had imagined. Jesus came riding in on a donkey, just like the prophet Zechariah predicted the Messiah would, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey...” (Zechariah 9:9). The crowd sang the words of Psalm 118 over and over. It was a psalm they knew well.

“Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!”

Luke only uses part of the psalm, but it is likely the people would have been singing the whole song, which is a song of victory, praising God because God heard the cries of the people and delivered them. It is a psalm that welcomes the king whom God used to deliver them from their enemies and restore them to safety.

Indeed, the scene was playing out just as James had hoped. What could possibly go wrong?

What comes to your mind when you think about Palm Sunday?

***SLIDE**

If you grew up in the church, you probably have memories of children parading around with palm branches while the congregation sang or

shouted, “Hosanna!” (which means “Save us”) During a Palm Sunday children’s sermon once, one of the children asked me if Jesus threw candy as he went by the people that day. I so badly wanted to tell him yes because I knew he would be super disappointed when I told him the truth.

Our memories, and even the way in which we reenact the story today, don’t bear much resemblance to Luke’s story. You may have noticed when I read the text that palm branches weren’t even mentioned, only cloaks on the ground. And as much as I loved seeing the people and pets in our virtual palm parade, it didn’t accurately reflect the story either. You see, Jesus was not the leader of a parade. He was the leader of a movement, the instigator of a protest. And this protest was a protest against the exploitation of the most vulnerable people. It was a protest against religious leaders who collaborated with oppressors. It was a protest against Rome itself. It was loud. It was an “in your face” planned display of resistance. It is no wonder the religious leaders, who had been working so hard to maintain the status quo said to Jesus, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” To which he responded, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

This story has always been one of my favorites because, as you know, I like the “in your face” Jesus. That’s a Jesus I can relate to. I bet you can too. So much of who we are as a church is grounded in the “in your face” Jesus that demanded equity, stood on the side of the most vulnerable, and faced injustice with courage and compassion. We read this story and are reminded that, very often, following Jesus is speaking truth to power and bringing about justice through our actions, and sometimes, for some of us, that includes protests.

There have been more than a few protests in our country since we last read the story of Palm Sunday. Following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis last summer, in cities all over the country, people took to

the streets to draw attention to and demand that the systems built on racism, that deprive Black people of justice and their very lives every single day, be dismantled. I've been to a lot of protests, protests on behalf of immigrants, Black people, Muslims, protests demanding equality for women and healthcare for all. I've always imagined, if Jesus was alive today, we would find him among the protestors, demanding justice, working for change.

I imagine dark-skinned, "in your face" Jesus holding a Black Lives Matter sign and chanting "No justice, no peace. No justice, no peace." I imagine him walking along with the crowd, blending in, talking to the other protestors, and taking selfies with his friends. This week, I thought a lot about the ways in which this image of Jesus struggling for justice alongside us has shaped my own theology and the theology of a lot of progressive Christians, probably many of you.

I was forced to examine all of that, though, when a colleague asked me if I thought the protest at the Capitol on January 6th was a place Jesus would be, holding a sign, taking selfies. The answer seemed so obvious to me, "absolutely not," I said. He pointed out that the language of revolution we use to talk about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is the same language we use at protests and it's the same language that supporters and participants of the event at the Capitol used.

Many of us watched in horror as bodies were smashed in the automatic door at the Capitol, at the imagery of the noose on the Capitol grounds, and when we heard a police officer had been fatally wounded. But the truth is, not everyone was horrified, including some Christians. Did they imagine Jesus was present there in the same way I have imagined him at the protests I've participated in?

I went back and listened to some of the TV interviews with people who participated at the Capitol on January 6th. They said things like, "We have to remind them that the Capitol belongs to the people." They

even blasted some of my favorite protest music through speakers; songs like “We’re Not Gonna Take It” by Twisted Sister.

We're not gonna take it
Oh no, we ain't gonna take it
We're not gonna take it anymore
We've got the right to choose it
There ain't no way we'll lose it
This is our life, this is our song
We'll fight the powers that be just
Don't pick our destiny...

There were Christian flags and signs that said things like, “The children cry out for justice,” and “Jesus 2020.”

These snippets, and hearing people talk about the action at the Capitol in terms of living out their faith, convinced me that we have to draw a clear distinction between protest aimed at bringing about the kin-dom of God and protest that brings more brokenness to an already fragmented world. Words matter, and the words we’ve used to talk about that first Palm Sunday sound an awful lot like the words that have been used to describe the events of January 6th:

Radical

Fighting for Justice

Challenging Authority

Demanding Change

Revolutionary

Even the word insurrection-

Death on a cross was reserved for people who were accused of insurrection, violent threats to the government. Was Jesus an insurrectionist? As I thought about the picture Rev. Hemm painted for us last week of James living his best life, it occurred to me that Jesus’ followers may very well have been expecting something a lot like what

happened on January 6th and probably even more violent. Clearly they imagined Jesus there, so why can't I?

Because unlike his followers 2000 years ago and unlike many of us today, Jesus knew that physical violence and the violence of oppression would not be what brings about the kin-dom of God. Everyone around Jesus that day was happy and excited. Jesus came into the city of Jerusalem, looked at it and wept. He said, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes." The people didn't see that their thirst for violence would lead to their own destruction. They didn't understand Jesus' mission. The people of Jerusalem did not see, hear, or know what Jesus was trying to do. And very soon, it would be over.

What could possibly go wrong? Well, Jesus would die a cruel, unjust death. That was wrong. And it was awful. But what is worse, is that, more than 2000 years later, his followers still don't completely understand the kin-dom of God Jesus was willing to die for.

The kin-dom of God will not be brought about through violence. We will see it and experience it when our neighbors have access to healthcare, when systems built on racism are dismantled, when we realize more guns do not make us safer, when leaders lead from a place of compassion and love for their people, when there is equity in our workplaces and communities, when all loving relationships are valued and affirmed, and when we realize there is no "other," only us. Y'all who like to Tweet, Tweet that. Post that on Facebook. Those are the reasons we protest, those things are worth sacrificing for. Those are the things that will bring about the peace for which Jesus wept.

I feel differently about Palm Sunday this year. After a year of isolation, a contentious election cycle, bearing witness to the ongoing suffering of our Black and brown siblings as they are denied justice, grieving the loss

of millions of people that did not have to die of COVID, and seeing the deep division that exists in our nation and our community, even among people of faith, I've remembered that the point of Palm Sunday was and is revolution, but without swords. It was and is battle, but without violence. The kin-dom of God will be ushered in, but not by a soldier riding on a war horse, by the followers of an itinerant rabbi who rode in on a donkey and spoke words of compassion and blessing to the ones who are most vulnerable.

Everything feels a little raw. I am tired. I think we are all tired. The world is tired. Sometimes I worry that all human beings really know is fear, self-preservation, and violence. As we begin this Holy Week, if I'm honest, I feel more like standing next to Jesus and crying, "Save us from ourselves," because I know what could possibly go wrong because it has. You read the news. There is brokenness everywhere and the ways in which human beings continue to oppress and inflict suffering on other human beings, breaks it further.

And that is what this week is about. It is about reminding us that violence will not win, love will. On Thursday, we will gather online to remember Jesus' last meal with his friends. After the meal and some time in prayer, Jesus was arrested and killed. It was violent. There was suffering. I encourage you to sit with that this week because the world needs us to bear witness to its suffering. There is still so much work for us to do, in our hearts and in our world.

But remember...Easter is coming. Next week, come and see what love can do. Amen.