

Palm Sunday
Luke 19:29-40
Genesis 37:1-11
Rev. Kelley L. Becker

Luke 19:29-40

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 Now as he was 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 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."

Sermon

When I was parenting teenagers, there were two things I refused to argue about: how they chose to wear their hair and the clothes they chose to wear on their bodies. There were times it was difficult, but I tried to move past my own discomfort and thinking the choices they made in those areas were somehow a reflection on my mothering. And the truth was and is, I really believe hair and clothes are ways we all express who we are, and young people have every right to express themselves in those ways as well. It is an important part of growing up.

Because of this belief, Andrew, my youngest, more than once, wore pajamas to school. When he was in high school, he refused to wear long pants, even in the dead of winter. He was dropped at the door of the school in the morning and picked up after practice every afternoon, so I decided no harm would come to him. Christopher had a collection of capes he wore as his “coat” for an entire school year. I mean...he had to; he was a superhero. As far as their hair, between the two of them, I think at some point we covered every hair color and length available to us. It was an adventure.

As I look back on some of their fashion choices (and to be honest, my own fashion choices) I have no idea what they (or younger Kelley) were trying to say about themselves, but they were saying it. It’s fun now to show them pictures and watch them cringe. I always remind them, that in the moment, they felt their choices were cutting edge choices. We all do it. Some of us wear edgy t-shirts that tell the world what we think about all manner of things. Others always wear a hat or always wear black or always wear a certain kind of shoes. Some of us wear scrubs or robes or badges because of our jobs. What we wear tells a story about who we are.

In the story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, his followers took off their coats and put them on the donkey on which he was riding and used them to cover the ground before him as he walked into the city. This morning, I want us to think about the story those coats can tell us about their owners and their willingness to offer them that day. What might those coats have to teach us about being followers of Jesus?

In first century Jerusalem, the people who lived in there, and who had traveled there before, would have been very familiar with processions into their city. But unlike Jesus’ procession, the processions they were accustomed to seeing were military processions, performed by the Roman army. They were timed to coincide with major Jewish festivals that took place at the temple in Jerusalem. The Romans wanted to make sure the faithful Jewish folks coming to the temple remembered their place. And their place was under the thumbs of the Romans. The Romans were in charge, and peace, though it was forced peace, would be maintained and Roman rule would be respected.

These processions were quite the spectacle. Imagine calvary on horses, foot soldiers with leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, and the sun reflecting off the metal and gold. It was both magnificent and terrifying. The sounds of the procession were equally so: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. Some of the people who looked on were curious, others were resentful. I am guessing some were both.¹ They couldn't bring themselves to look away.

The powerful message was clear, "We will squash you if you step out of line." But there was another message present in these processions, and it was a theological message. It had to do with how the Romans thought of their emperor. You see, the emperor of Rome wasn't just the ruler of the Roman Empire, he wasn't just a king. To the Romans, he was the son of God and there was an expectation the people would acknowledge that.

This theological construct began with the emperor Augustus whose father, according to the story, was the god Apollo. Because of that, Augustus was called, "son of god," "savior," and even "lord." When Augustus died, legend has it that he ascended into the heavens to live forever with the gods. Based on that story it's easy to understand the stories about Jesus told by early Christians. From Augustus on, successors continued to bear divine titles, right up to Tiberius who was the emperor during Jesus' public ministry. If Tiberius was the god of the Empire, which included Jerusalem, then what did that say about the place of the God of Israel? The Romans had no respect for the Jewish people or their traditions.

Unlike the Roman soldiers, Jesus rode into Jerusalem that day, not on a warhorse, but on a donkey, deliberately countering, some would say lampooning, the message of the Roman military procession. While the Roman military embodied the power, glory, and violence of the empire and declared allegiance to their ruler god, Jesus' procession, along a road strewn with leafy branches and coats, with the sound of the people shouting, "Hosanna! Save us!" presented an alternative vision. A vision of peace, humility, justice, and faithfulness to the ways of the God of Israel.

¹ Borg, Marcus and Crossan, Dominic, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Last Days in Jerusalem*, Harper One: New York, 2006, 3.

There was tension in the air. Jesus and his followers were making fun of their oppressors right under their noses, amid an already very tense time in Jerusalem. As I imagine this day, I wonder...were his followers looking around, watching for a sign of the Roman army? Were there some followers who watched from afar, afraid to get too close in case the military swooped in? Were families afraid to have their children there? The text doesn't ask or answer any of those questions, so we are left to wonder how we would have felt and what we would have done.

Every year on Palm Sunday, when we reenact Jesus' procession into the city, we do pretty well...waving the palms, throwing down the coats, we don't shout hosanna, but we sing it. The thing we can't really recreate is that tension. Tension is something that kind of just happens. We've all been in tense spaces, when whatever is going on is awkward, embarrassing, or emotionally fraught. Like the meeting at work when everyone knows it was the boss who made the horrible mistake, and as he demands an explanation, nobody wants to be the one to actually explain the truth. Or the family dinner where Uncle Albert talks about Bruno and "we don't talk about Bruno." Or the funeral when the deceased's estranged daughter stands up to speak and she seems a little tipsy.

I don't know how to whip up that kind of tension amid a Palm Sunday processional. Maybe we need different music.

(Alex plays sinister music)

Yes, that will fix it. Ben, make a note, that is our Palm Sunday processional music next year.

My point is Jesus' procession was not a parade. The people along the road, shouting hosanna and laying down their coats were taking an incredible risk. To be clear, these were people who didn't have much to lose. Like the capes my son used to wear to tell the world he was a budding superhero, their coats tell us something about Jesus' followers. The coats so generously offered were probably the only coats they owned. They didn't go to their coat closets on their way out the door and pick one of many. These were humble people who gave what they had on them because they wanted to be more than spectators that day; they wanted to fully participate in this radical political protest. Metaphorically, they wanted to be in the room where it happened.

The owners of those coats worked hard for everything they had. Their coats were likely covered in dust before they even laid them on the road or across the back of

the donkey. They were covered in dust from hard work with little but dust to show for it. A lot of the people were farming someone else's land to feed their families. And in some cases, that land used to belong to their families, but the wealthy elites made sure they couldn't afford to keep it. The food they harvested no longer went to their dinner tables, it made money for the landowners and now the farmers had to buy back the food to feed their families. No wonder they were willing to risk it all, hoping Jesus was going to fix it. They hoped he was the one the prophets had written about.

There he was, riding in on a donkey, just like Zechariah predicted, "Tell the daughter of Zion (Jerusalem), look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey..." (Zechariah 9:9)

These coats are not the only coats in the biblical narrative. Way back in Genesis there was Joseph's coat. Now that coat had quite a story. Joseph was one of Jacob's sons, in fact he was Jacob's favorite son, and he didn't hide that very well. Jacob gave Joseph a special coat.

Most of us learned that it was a "coat of many colors," but the translation could also be "robe with long sleeves," which would not make for a very good song. Either way, the point was the coat was special; it was embellished in some way so that one would not wear that coat for working. It set Joseph apart from his siblings. His brothers were jealous because Joseph was the favorite, he was treated differently, and the coat was an "in their faces" reminder of his specialness. And instead of reading the room and treading lightly, Joseph went around proudly wearing the coat and talking about his dreams, specifically he told his brothers about the dream he had that they would all one day bow to him, something no sibling wants to hear from another. Unlike the stories of humility and generosity of the coats that paved the way for Jesus in Jerusalem that day, Joseph's coat ended up telling a story of favoritism and pride, that ultimately led to violence and lies.

The story of Joseph's coat was, in some ways, was like the story told by the armor worn by the Roman soldiers in the military procession. The people in Jerusalem that day had to decide with what kind of procession they wanted to align. They had to decide what kind of story they wanted their lives to tell. The same is true for us. Do we want to align with Rome or with Jesus? We can't choose both. It must be one or the other. This isn't true for all choices in life, that they are mutually exclusive, but it is true for this one. Will we align with the ones whose

way is paved with money, power, pride, and violence, or will we align with the ones who are vulnerable, oppressed, humble, and peaceful?

The story we tell on Palm Sunday is important as we continue our Lenten self-reflection. This story gives us a picture of what choosing Jesus, like the ones who lined the road that day, looks like. If we choose Jesus, we will be asked to do things that are uncomfortable, like commandeer a donkey and literally offer the coats off our backs. We will have to sit in the tension of not knowing what is next, very aware that we will find ourselves in the same spaces as the ones who have chosen the way of Rome and we will have to know that the ways of Jesus compel us to speak truth, seek justice, and work for peace, in a world that feels tense, a lot like first century Jerusalem

If we walk through the stories of Jesus' final days this week, we will see that, day by day, the tension rose. He was trick-questioned by the temple authorities, who were trying to walk a very difficult line between staying in the good graces of the Romans and doing their jobs. And sadly, we will see that some of them cross the line and join their oppressors in oppressing the people they are supposed to be protecting. And before we get too judge-y about that, we should remember that there is a good chance our location in the story is more like the location of the religious leaders gone astray than it is the humble followers of Jesus.

After all, these coats we put around our communion table this morning were likely not the only coats we own. Maybe we even went to the store and bought a new coat to give (which, don't get me wrong, was generous). The coats in our closets, for the most part, are more like Joseph's fancy coat or the greatly embellished robes of the religious leaders gone astray, than the ones on the ground in Jerusalem that day. Our coats do provide good protection, but mostly that protection is for us. They haven't spent time under a bridge with someone who is houseless or drying the tears of an immigrant far from their homeland. Our coats, dear ones, ought to be a little dusty.

This story reminds us that following Jesus doesn't really happen here, in the comfort of this sanctuary. It happens in the streets, in the places that feel tense and inhospitable, in the places where no one is looking. So, this week, we will follow Jesus as he answers questions, teaches us about serving one another, as he tries to wake his disciples from their slumber in the Garden, and when his fears

are confirmed, and he is face to face with betrayal and denial. And, we will follow him to the cross on which he will die, not because we were born wretched sinners and he had to die, but because human beings have a propensity for fear and the Romans and their collaborators were very afraid the people would stop being afraid. And maybe this will be the week we stop being afraid and we will follow Jesus with our whole lives. That would truly be cause for an Easter celebration! I wish you a meaningful Holy Week, dear ones. Amen.