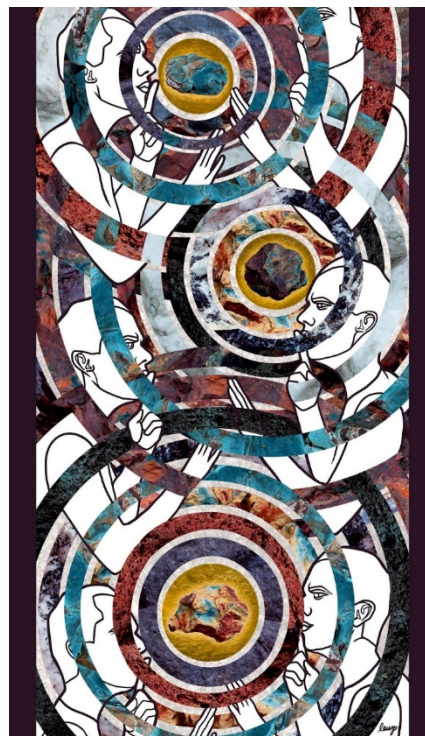


April 10, 2022, Palm Sunday

Luke 19:28-40

Even the Stones Cry Out

Prayer: Holy God, sometimes life feels like a parade rushing by as we stand on the sidelines and try not to miss it! There are hundreds of things that catch our eye, but the thing we fear missing the most is you. So slow down the speed of this parade. Paint the colors of this world a little brighter. And dance through the words in our scripture passage until it is impossible for us to miss your presence with us here....



One of the questions we can ask ourselves on Palm Sunday is who do we see riding into Jerusalem? Is Jesus a spiritual leader or a political leader? Do you see a Messiah, a prophet or a king? Is Jesus a solution or a threat? Who do you see?

An account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is included in all four gospels, indicating to us that this was important to those who remembered and re-told the story of Jesus' life. The scripture indicates there were a large number of eye-witnesses. All those who stood up and down the road and waved palm branches are witnesses to this event, they'd be telling their families, children, grandchildren for years afterward – they were there the day that Jesus rode in on the unbroken colt, the foal of a donkey. And what a sight!

Jerusalem had been conquered many times in history prior to Jesus' entry, and it has continued to be conquered many times since. This was not the only triumphal entry citizens of Jerusalem witnessed. In Jesus' public entrance, there are similarities to other political leaders and also important differences.

John Dominic Crossan has made the case that while many of our Bibles caption this section "The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem" at the time it was perceived by those who witnessed it as just the opposite of a *triumphal entry*. He says "it was actually an anti-triumphal entry, a calculated alternative to imperial normalcy with a prophetic pedigree going back to an oracle added to the book of Zechariah... (which) created a very deliberate contrast with how Alexander of Macedon had entered cities like Tyre and Gaza after devastating sieges... (and)... especially, with how he had entered Jerusalem when it finally decided not to resist but to submit and throw open its gates to the conqueror."^[3]

The average citizen endured some level of trauma when Roman authorities entered Jerusalem – each time the city was conquered and the new victor came in. Remember these streets are not paved in this era, the new ruler comes in with a show of force: the chariots are rolling behind

war horses, which are essentially draft horses – which are huge. Mounted cavalry comes in, foot soldiers and mercenaries marching in formation. They often took food from the houses as they came in, demanded money, were deafeningly noisy, sometimes drunk, and made a mess. The dust. The dust alone. These streets are not paved and if it was dry you'd have a dust cloud so large it hung over the city. If you saw them coming, you would run home as fast as you could, close your windows and doors, roll up your rugs and use them to block out any crevice where the dust might come in. While the triumphal parade rattled by. Otherwise a considerable layer of dust would cover everything. If it was rainy, it was mud, not dust, that was everywhere. You'd need to do something to protect your livestock also – they need to be able to breathe – minimally.

By contrast, in the manner of his entry – a peaceful, nonthreatening one – Jesus is doubly subversive. He is at once:

- lampooning the triumphal entry of the political conqueror, it's a mockery of Pilate, Herod and all of those in power
- and he is fulfilling prophecy, which is an important theme in the New Testament. Jesus himself provides the continuity between what we know today as the New Testament and the Old Testament.

Zechariah 9 is in the background of Jesus' actions, and at least some of those who witnessed his entry would have been remembering these words:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you;

triumphant and victorious is he,

humble and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim

and the warhorse from Jerusalem;

and the battle-bow shall be cut off,

and he shall command peace to the nations;

his dominion shall be from sea to sea,

and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Zechariah 9:9-10)

In our day the weapons of war, the tools and enforcers of political power are all around us. They are not on Main Street here, but the news is full of images of the war in Ukraine – tanks, air strikes, missiles, troops fighting to control the area. To say nothing of the victims and collateral damage of this war. This is our context.

Serving in New Haven I found many of our church members knew one another from having worked together at Winchester Repeating Arms. In the greater Hartford area it is not unusual to find people who have worked at Colt Manufacturing, or who have family members who have. As early as the revolutionary war Connecticut was known as the arsenal of the nation – and this has been a matter of pride. Where I live, many of our friends and neighbors are employed at Electric Boat, building nuclear submarines. When I served a church in Suffield, CT we had members who worked at Smith and Wessen in Springfield, MA. I was there when the Newtown shootings happened. No one was more shaken than those who worked in armaments. They were not okay. And it isn't because anyone wanted to discuss the politics of gun control, it was because there had been a terrible, terrible accident. And they were devastated. I am not against these industries, I recognize they have their place, how necessary they are, accidents and all. I'm here to tell you that there's more

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Beans the Donkey is visiting today. I'm hoping you'll take a moment after worship to go meet Beans. Look at him, take him in. Consider the nature of Beans' life. Consider how he is different from a Russian tank, or a nuclear submarine, or a Winchester rifle, or a Colt 45.

I do not know Beans personally, but I am given to understand that donkeys are very good at protecting livestock from coyotes and other predators. Donkeys are great pack animals, stubborn by nature. Beans is not part of the machines of war. Beans knows nothing of battle, and can't be used for the things that make for war. Animals which had never been used for other purposes were considered appropriate to use for sacred purposes. Imagine Jesus coming into Jerusalem on the unbroken foal of one such animal. It is ridiculous. Riding a donkey, Jesus is not a political threat. Jesus is hilarious. He is the harbinger of a new world order. The prince of peace, they called him. King of kings. The man of sorrows. The Messiah of God.

In chapter 3 of this gospel Jesus reminds the religious authorities that if they do not follow the intent of God's teachings, God is able to raise up disciples from the stones themselves. When the people hailed Jesus' entry, some of the Pharisees asked him to silence them. Jesus said, "if they were silent, even the stones would cry out." This is what Beans the donkey reveals. Take a look. She does not speak, but she is a strong witness to the nature of his arrival in Jerusalem.

Jesus has given us the example of a vulnerable Messiah. This does nothing to prevent authorities from a variety of perspectives, ancient and contemporary, to seek to read their own ideas into his actions and to seek to use his work as a kind of cover for their own agendas. This has remained a problem for Jesus' followers as it was for Jesus himself in the year 30. When faith enters the political sphere, it can quickly become co-opted for other purposes. Yet, Jesus entered Jerusalem willingly, and freely engaged the authorities of his day.

Go talk it over with Beans the Donkey. Jesus entered the political sphere with humility. Just look at her. Humble, peaceful, ordinary...

That means our humility is important, our vulnerability is part of how we reflect God's image, it means we can be betrayed, it means we are mortal, we can get sick – we can catch covid and anything else that comes along, and it means we are both perfect for each other, and we chronically disappoint one another. It means that love will overcome; even death cannot divide us. It means that even if we are silenced the very stones will cry out. It means that God uses the humble, ordinary things for sacred purposes.

I'd like to refer you to the humble donkey, Beans. For those of you with eyes to see. Jesus came in peace...

[1] Mt 21:1-9; Mk 11:1-10; Jn 12:12-18

[2] <https://israeled.org/jerusalem-timeline/>

[3] *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* John Dominic Crossan, Harper Collins, 2007, pp. 132

Wendell Berry says: To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want.

Questions for reflection and conversation:

- As we begin our walk through Holy Week, let us ask: what can't be silenced? What must be communicated? What things can we not stay quiet about?

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