

King and God and Sacrifice

Palm Sunday
March 20, 2016
Andrew Spidahl

Text: Luke 19:28-40

- Focus: The crowds enter fully into the moment of hopeful rejoicing without understanding its significance, and so can we.
- Function: Free the congregation to rejoice and give thanks with hope even though our understanding is incomplete and the times are dark.

Those of you who are Facebook friends with my wife Kallie may have seen an unusual post about me and one of our cats this past week.

Kallie and I were sitting down to lunch, and I don't know how it is for you, but sometimes lunch can feel like a forced break. I love lunch, but when you are burdened with the thought of many tasks unfinished, lunch can be a forced discipline. This was one of those days, as I recall, for me – and we are also carrying some burden about what's next. As my pastoral residency finishes up this month, we have the opportunity and the burden to ask, what's next for us?

And so I began our prayer like this, “Lord, we thank you for this day. And, no matter what happens...”

As soon as I had spoken the words “no matter what happens,” I heard a small but powerful heaving noise behind me. Now it's in these moments where you get confronted with faith questions like, do I wait to attend the violent heaving noise behind until after the prayer? Or do we interrupt our connection to God to attend to the heaving noises, and then return to our prayer?

I've found in these moments that often instinct kicks in, and we found ourselves instinctively turning to see what was happening. There behind us in the center of the living room floor was our cat Stuart, projecting vomit like a weighed down rotating sprinkler... in all directions.

I could not imagine a cat could contain so much vomit.

We watched for an instant, stunned and fascinated, until he took a few more steps and recommenced. That sprung me into damage control mode, and I did what I could to quarantine the poor kitty.

I have to confess that my response in this particular moment was hardly prayerful... even though I had just prayed, “No matter what happens...”
“And no matter what happens,” I wanted to pray, “we will give thanks, we will rejoice, and we will trust you.” But before I could get to the thanks, rejoice, and trust, I was interrupted by kitty vomit.

After the initial shock of it, Kal and I had to laugh.
Neither of us had expected a test of that prayer so soon.
That processional we did today, the Tripudium, what does it say in the bulletin?

“expressing the paradoxical nature of this day - symbolizing the nature of our spiritual walk; of our ability to cheer one moment, and condemn the next.”
Or “to pray one moment, and curse the next” perhaps...

But it did get me thinking about this day. The Palm Sunday, the triumphal entry - the “no matter what happens” of this day.

Because we have here some dramatic irony. Where the audience, the listeners, know something that the characters do not. We know from the story that Jerusalem is not the place where Jesus will take the throne, will gather and unite Israel against the oppressing rulers, and begin God’s kingdom like many hoped. At least, not in the way that was imagined. In fact, it would seem the opposite. He would be handed over, beaten, condemned, and executed as a criminal. We know that because we have the story.

But I’d like us to put ourselves in the crowd’s shoes this morning. First by trying to understand what’s happening at that time in history and what’s happening in the story Luke is telling us. And second by trying to get into their energy – their excitement, their wondering, their hope – at this young prophet who works miracles, who had gathered a following, and now was about to enter Jerusalem just like the prophecies said.

Because the prophecies spoke about a king who would come to usher in the peaceful reign of God. The chief prophecy is from Zechariah 9:

“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...he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea.”

And Zech 14, speaking about the coming of the LORD:

“On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives...and the LORD will become king over all the earth.”

Everyone would have known these prophecies because everyone was looking for God’s anointed, the true king that would bring in God’s reign. Luke knows this and is intentionally telling about the donkey and the Mount of Olives (he mentions it twice!) to make us connect King and God in this moment.

And, our gospel passage begins, “After he had said this...” What is “*this*”?

If you look in your bible you can see it’s a somewhat longish parable told, it says, “because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately.” So its about a king, and here is the last verse before our passage begins:

“But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and slaughter them in my presence.”

A terrible image of a king’s power in that day.

And then it begins, “After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem...”

So Luke has us primed for king, no matter what happens.

And at that time Jerusalem was under foreign power—occupied by the Roman empire. And Rome had a history of victory marches for their conquering generals, which honored them like kings or even deities. So the form of a triumphal procession was not unfamiliar.

Also, about a hundred years earlier, a Jew named Simon had taken back Jerusalem from foreign power, and rode in a processional celebration that included praises, palm branches, songs and instruments. This story would be part of the peoples' memory, and they would have wondered, "Is this Jesus of Nazareth similar to Simon in the days of the Maccabees?"
"Will he be the one to retake Jerusalem, give us back our home?"

All this to say, the people had it in their heads. They were hopeful. Zechariah has this great verse connected to the earlier prophecy that says, "Return to your fortress you prisoners of hope!" Prisoners of hope. I like that. They couldn't help but hope for a king—they were *bound* to be hopeful.

But we know what happens.

This dramatic irony can lead us to condemn the crowd as fickle. Or naïve.
"If they only would have known what they were doing..."
As if we, in their shoes, would have been more like the Pharisees – "Teacher tell your disciples to be quiet!"
"They don't know what they're saying. Besides they're putting you in danger!"
"Why are you cheering him on to his death? Don't you know this is the end?" (stupid crowd.)

Or even if we don't condemn the joyful crowd, we might be more reserved. How can we enter into the reverie knowing what's coming? How can we rejoice in the face of such terrible sadness and suffering? And tragedy? Even if we know that gloriously he will arise, King and God and Sacrifice... we can't rejoice with the crowd at this time.

I understand this position.

But I don't want to take that position. I don't want us to take that position, though crowds certainly can be both stupid and fickle, and dangerous to boot, and the gathering clouds of sorrow draw us away from dancing in the streets to brooding in the doorways.
I don't want us to stand with the careful Pharisees. I want us to be willing to enter in with the crowd, "no matter what happens."

These last couple weeks we've heard from Pastor Jill about rejoicing and extravagance. She challenged us two weeks ago, with the story of the prodigal son, to take our posture from the father in that story – to make it a Lent discipline to rejoice, to be the first to embrace...

And then there was Mary's extravagant gesture. Recognizing the moment and honoring it with all she had...

...That emulating these two postures can encourage us "to come to the table with joy despite the backdrop of suffering."

That's what I'm after here when I say "no matter what happens."

I can hear the teacher of Ecclesiastes saying, there is a time.

There is a time to be cautious and reserved. And there is a time to enter fully into what we do not fully understand. After all, isn't this faith?

All these troublesome questions about suffering and evil – can they be subsumed into the oceanic confession that God is and that God is love?

Can they be worked out within that atmosphere? Not fully understood, but fully entered?

That's what I want us to be, Hope Church. I want us to be with the crowd. Prisoners of Hope. To enter fully into the day we live in, rejoicing.

I think there's more than one reason children are highlighted during Palm Sunday. Of course, it's fun to wave palms and to process and to sing. And we have Matthew's gospel telling us that the children were crying out "Hosanna to the Son of David" in the temple.

Children embody an innocence and acceptance of things they don't quite understand, but they enter anyway. Not blindly, not with eyes closed, but with curious eyes of wonder open--open to seeing again, to learning, to feeling.

As Jesus said, "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Enter the rejoicing crowd today. Let go a bit.

Get caught up in the story that's bigger than you or me – bigger than what we can understand.

What is it we say to infants at Baptism?

"for you Jesus came into the world, for you he died and conquered death;
all this he did for you, little one, though you know nothing of it as yet."

And what do we really know about the mystery of the table fellowship with God, after years of debates and fighting and excluding and protecting? Can we confidently explain what happens when we come to the table, say the words, receive the bread and wine, join together in prayer? Friends in these things we are also prisoners of hope, darkened in our understanding, yet able to rejoice as we come.

As we come to the table today, we remember that

"this is the day the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it."

So let our prayer be: Hosanna! Save us! We are saved!

By our King and God and Sacrifice.