

“Awaiting the Reign of Peace”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Psalm 118:1-2, 18-28; Luke 19:28-44

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Palm Sunday

This procession was not a new sight in Jerusalem, but the donkey was an intriguing twist to mark a king’s arrival. In its history, Jerusalem had seen kings and army commanders enter its gates as victors or conquerors with ticker-tape festivities. As Jesus rode that donkey toward Jerusalem, he was following the pattern of victory processions [Paul Brooks Duff, as quoted in the Interpreter’s Bible Luke-John, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 366]:

- The king or commander is escorted into the city by the citizenry or army; Jesus’ disciples and a crowd line the parade route.
- There are songs sung and acclamations shouted; Hosanna! is shouted, meaning, “Save us.”
- The authority of the ruler is depicted; Jesus is called king.
- The entrance is followed by a ritual, often in a temple, where the ruler symbolically appropriates the city, by claiming authority over it. While not in today’s reading, Jesus cleanses the temple following the procession.

One could argue making such parallels diminish the uniqueness of what we call the Palm Sunday procession. I find it deepens my understanding of Jesus’ identity on that day, and for the way victory and peace are envisioned by God.

In each of the gospels, Jesus calls the shots for Palm Sunday, instructing the disciples about the animal he is going to ride, where to find it, and how they are to respond when asked why they are hijacking a donkey. Yet, Luke is unique in his telling in several ways.

Luke alone includes the word “king” in the shouted blessings we also read in Psalm 118, and adds a second phrase: *“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!”*

Luke also includes this reaction by the observing Pharisees:

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

Finally, in Luke’s gospel, before Jesus descends the Mount of Olives to enter the city, he stops and looks down on Jerusalem. Then, the prince of peace, weeps over Jerusalem, 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. ⁴³Indeed, 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. ⁴⁴They 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.’

A common Palm Sunday plea offered by preachers is to say you cannot truly reach Easter unless you walk through Holy Week. Ann Weems concludes her poem, “Holy Week” with a similar encouragement:

“The only way to Easter morning is through the unrelenting shadows of that Friday. Only then will the alleluias be sung; only then will the dancing begin.” [Weems, Ann, *Kneeling in Jerusalem*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), p. 67.] Yet, in a world full of sorrow, and lives that can be mixtures of anxiety and uncertainty, it is tempting to leap from the Palm Sunday parade to the Easter celebration.

Today begins the journey into Holy Week, with festivities that seem disconnected from the impending betrayal and death. Catching my attention are those words Luke includes in the Palm Sunday accolades, *“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”* These words echo angels’ announcement to the shepherds at Jesus’ birth: *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”* Today, the hope of peace is still on the agenda, even as Jesus enters the week of his passion.

When Jesus wept over Jerusalem, he despaired a nation’s people had not seen the visitation of his peace; in the week ahead, the actions of his own disciples will grieve him as well. Fear will take hold of them, and we know fear can cause us to flee or fight, to deny knowledge as will Peter, or to lash out to protect. One of his followers will pull out a sword at his arrest in the garden. Jesus will correct him, and then heal the ear of one who has come to arrest him.

Today, as Jesus processes in symbolic humility on a donkey, he is announcing to both nation and individual, his kingdom is not about taking up the sword of power, but taking on the extraordinary steadfast love of God expressed in Psalm 118. Steadfast love, the word “hesed” in Hebrew, marks God’s capacity to love and keep covenant, even when God has every right to grieve and give up, weep and withdraw.

Psalm 118 is the last of six psalms called the Egyptian Hallel psalms [113-118], which celebrate God’s deliverance of Israel from the oppression and slavery of Egypt. The psalms are recited for Jewish holy days, particularly Passover, and contain allusions to the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15. That song is sung to celebrate the army of Pharaoh being drowned when the Red Sea’s wall of water collapses in on them.

Now, more than once I have wondered about that and other stories of destruction and violence seemingly attributed to God in the Hebrew Scriptures, as have people with whom I have shared Bible study. So, a number of years ago, it was instructive for me to hear a rabbi sing the Song of the Sea, in Hebrew, and then tell of God’s reaction as recorded in the Jewish Midrash.

The Midrash relates how there was great celebration among the people at their enemy’s destruction, but when the angels return to the heavens to sing a song of celebration, God stops them. Seeing even the Egyptian army as children of the Creation, formed by God’s own hands, God tells the angels, “The work of my hands are drowning in the sea, and you want to sing a song?”

For me, this is a reminder to us of God’s grief at any and all inhumanity people inflict upon one another, by either individual acts of abuse or violence, or national animosities and atrocities. By following the prince of peace into Holy Week, we are committing to a different way of showing power.

When Jesus enters Jerusalem, it is easy to acclaim him as king and wave palms of praise, but during this week it will become clear that the things that make for peace will come through Jesus’ death.

We are invited to set down sword and pick up steadfast love, and to even grieve the death of an enemy. It is not an endeavor we can achieve by our own human will, and our history marks more failures than successes in our obedience.

We need only reflect on battles and massacres of our modern history, as does Alan Culpepper in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke. [Culpepper, Alan, Interpreter's Bible Luke-John, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 375] He writes, "Go to Shiloh, to Bataan or Guadalcanal, to Hiroshima or Coventry, to Anzio or Gettysburg, Omaha Beach or the nameless sites of the Tet offensive. [Go to Wounded Knee, or the villages of Rwanda and Congo, a prison named Abu Ghraib, or a camp called Auschwitz, or the hilltop homes of the Kurdish Yazidi.] [Our] Messiah's lament echoes in each of these places and hundreds and hundreds more: 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!'"

We pray for peace, but often with the hope God will simply send it, opening the heavens and raining peace upon the world. I think of the gospel hymn title, "There Will Be Showers of Blessings," with its vertical theology of our looking up and waiting for what God will do, as if our sole requirement is to simply trust and obey and let God have God's way. The problem is we have a tendency to define obedience by narrow definitions of what we have deemed proper and profane, or set rules of what is acceptable to God based on our human prejudice or political leaning. Yet, underlying these differences, I believe we share a common prayer, often expressed by "our thirst for peace."

A phrase written by Dag Hammarskjold made me consider a thirsting for peace in a different way; namely, of God thirsting for peace. Hammarskjold wrote: "I am the vessel. The draft is God's. And God is the thirsty one." [Hammarskjold, Dag, source unknown.] The image reminds me we are not simply empty vessels waiting to be filled, but already recipients of a divine spirit of peace, the contents of which will be enjoyed by God when we dare to share it and pour it out into this world. So, instead of us awaiting the reign of peace from God, we might envision Jesus still awaiting the reign of peace in us.

As we hear Jesus weeping over Jerusalem for not knowing the things that make for peace, I wondered, what if we approached this week imagining God thirsting for peace, and how we might alleviate God's thirst? What if, in defiance of the power of empire, and our own dependence on the security it provides, we stood firm on Jesus' cornerstone of peace that empire builders reject? What if we walked into this week with the simple notion it is unacceptable for people to do harm to one another? Idealistic drivel, some will say. Yet, I believe our lessons declare whenever and wherever harm is inflicted, whether by insult or injury, violence or vengeance, God remains thirsty, and Jesus can be heard weeping.

People speak of putting on the mind of Christ as his disciples. I think we are also challenged to stand above the Jerusalem's of our day and shed the tears of Christ. So, even as we pray, "O God, we are thirsting for peace for this world," let us add to our prayer, "O God, we know you are thirsting for peace from us."