

Palm Sunday – Luke 19:29-44

Luke's version of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem has some important differences from the other gospels. For one thing, there's no palms, or any other type of branch. I don't really know if that's significant or not. At a minimum, Luke apparently didn't consider it the most important aspect of the story.

But the other differences I think are important. First, the multitude of people are disciples, not the generic crowd the other gospels have. And they are praising God for the deeds of power they have seen Jesus work.

So let's talk about who that multitude is. First of all, it's clearly more than just the 12. The 12 were Jesus' inner circle – but a multitude is way more than 12. We know from the scripture that there were other people who followed Jesus on his travels. He picked up disciples along the way – disciples who were captivated by his teaching and by his vision of the Kingdom of God...disciples who'd experienced some of his deeds of power. So who all might be in that multitude?

Maybe the man whose withered hand Jesus healed on the Sabbath is there. Maybe the Centurion and his slave whom Jesus healed. Maybe the folks who had demons cast out are in the crowd. So many other people have been healed by Jesus' touch. Are some of them in this multitude? Maybe some of them were among the thousands who Jesus fed with five loaves of bread and two fish. Maybe people who heard Jesus say he had come to bring good news to the poor...news that was brought home in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus...maybe they're there, looking towards a better future.

I bet Mary and Martha are there. We know from earlier in Luke that Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna traveled with him regularly, so they're probably there. And maybe Mary his mother. Is Zacchaeus in the crowd, and some of the other tax collectors and sinners Jesus broke bread with? It's a different image than we get from other Palm Sunday accounts. And there is no evidence that this is the same group that will later shout "Crucify him!"

A second important difference is that there are no Hosannas! Hosanna means save us. It is an echo of Psalm 118. In fact in the other gospel accounts, the people's cry is almost word for word part of Psalm 118, a classic processional Psalm. But in Luke's account, they cry something different. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! OK, that part's more or less the same. But then there's this: Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven. If you hear echoes of the angels singing at Jesus' birth, you're on the right track. Maybe the shepherds are in this multitude as well...men whose lowly status did not disqualify them from being the first to hear of Jesus' birth.

Peace...peace seems like such a laudable goal. Why would the Pharisees want to shut up a crowd shouting for peace? It was actually the king part they're worried about. Jesus entered Jerusalem in a procession meant to evoke images of royalty. And when the crowd shouts "Blessed is the King" the blood of the Pharisees runs cold with fear. This is the sort of thing that gets people killed. The Pharisees are actually more on the same side as Jesus than we often get. They know that this procession will end badly for Jesus, and possibly for them. There's a whole system of Roman rule put in place to deal with anyone who challenges the Roman Emperor and the empire machine. It involves a unique instrument of torture and death...the cross.

See the Roman emperor also considers himself a king of peace...but that peace is a peace bought with tromping soldiers and gruesome public executions of those who are suspected of sedition. The Pharisees have learned how to survive in the Roman Empire while they wait for God's Messiah. And Jesus doesn't seem to have gotten the memo. And of course the Pharisees have failed to see that Jesus is that Messiah, because he doesn't do things the way they expected.

Even the peace Jesus proclaims is different. And the peaceful kingdom Jesus offers is in fact a threat to political and religious leaders who have so depended on human power and even violence. It's a threat to those who want to maintain a system that enables them to get richer and more powerful, while others barely scrape by.

So what does Jesus' peace look like? In the last part of today's reading, Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, again. He says "If only you could see, on this day of all days, what makes for peace! But you can't. You can only see a way of violence to defeat violence. And that will end in your destruction."

By the time Luke's gospel was written, it had already happened. The Jews rose up against the mighty Roman Empire. They actually met with success early on. But ultimately Rome was too powerful. In the year 70, the Jews were crushed and the Temple destroyed. Of course eventually the Roman Empire fell too. Violence cannot lead to long term peace. When violence ends, something else needs to move into its place...shalom.

The kind of peace Jesus was talking about is Shalom. Shalom is a Hebrew word we translate as peace. But it's way more than just the absence of conflict or violence. Shalom is well-being, wholeness, harmony. Shalom is where everyone has what they need to thrive. It's where bodies and souls are healed and broken relationships are made whole. It's when nobody is excluded from the community. It's when people live the life God intended.

Jesus has spent his whole ministry embodying and enacting that shalom. It's embodied in that very multitude with him who had seen his deeds of power. Shalom is embodied in those whose demons are cast out and who have become once again a part of their community. Shalom is embodied in all those whose sight was restored and infirmities healed. Shalom is embodied in the thousands of hungry people who were fed with five loaves of bread and two fish. Shalom is embodied by the tax collectors and sinners who have welcomed Jesus into their homes...and hearts...and whose lives were changed as a result.

Ultimately, shalom will be embodied on a cross. Because the human way of peace is to eliminate problems. Shalom meant being willing to die instead of respond with violence. And Jesus drags us with him, into a new life of shalom, healing our relationship with God, and inviting us to heal our relationships with one another. This kind of peace...shalom...is what the angels announced to the shepherds on that mystical night.

You'd think people would want that. But, like the Romans and the Pharisees, we too often just don't believe it's the way to get things done. We trust in our own power, as measured in fire power or brute strength or economic superiority. And when we think that is threatened, our main goal is to eliminate the threat. Shalom...is a peace that turns everything upside down. The Pharisees warned Jesus...they warned him that his way was going to get him...and maybe all of them...killed.

But that multitude of disciples had seen what Jesus could do. They knew better. They knew what real power...and real shalom looked like. It looked like them...all the ones who others believed were excluded from the promise of God. And they couldn't shut up about it. Had they tried, the stones themselves would have sung "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

Real shalom can't be forced from the outside. Real shalom is an inside job. There was a song written back in the 50's that was still a youth group and Bible camp favorite when I was young. It starts out "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." Some of you probably remember it too. Real peace does begin with us...it begins with us really taking in the events of Holy Week and what they mean for us. It begins with meditation and reflection on the last supper and what we receive in communion. It begins with entering in to the Good Friday story, and taking our place in it. It takes root with the promise of resurrection.

It begins with trusting that in us, Christ continues to work deeds of power and transformation...to make us into a new vision of Shalom.