**Crashing the Party**

**Text: Luke19:39-40**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**Palm Sunday**

**April 14, 2019**

During this season of Lent, we have been drawing upon Luke’s gospel as we’ve journeyed with Jesus toward Jerusalem. But when we look carefully at Luke’s account of Jesus’ entry into the Holy City, on what’s come to be known as Palm Sunday, the folks aren’t waving palms. Did you notice that? And, the people aren’t shouting “Hosanna!” That’s right; all the fun stuff that we associate with Palm Sunday isn’t in Luke’s story. It’s kind of like what we do with our Christmas pageants: we mush together Matthew’s and Luke’s versions of Jesus’ birth, with Matthew’s wise men and Luke’s shepherds, without always looking carefully at the particular way in which each one tells the story of the Nativity. Likewise, Palm Sunday: the Church has a tendency to cherry-pick its favorite parts of each version of the story – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – and produce a composite picture of the Triumphal Entry.

Well, as much as I love cherry’s, let’s not cherry-pick this year. Let’s take a look at some of the specific details of Luke’s story, and figure out what he’s trying to tell the Church about Jesus, and power, and courage.

First, let’s set the context. It’s Passover: the season when Jews most want to be in Jerusalem. And, the season when the Roman imperial occupiers were most fearful of a rebellion. Passover, of course, celebrates the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from their Egyptian overlords. Armed with the power of that story, the Jews who gathered in Jerusalem might be inspired to rise-up against their Roman overlords. That, at least, was the fear of Pontius Pilate and the Roman forces under his command. So, as Passover approached, Pilate rode into Jerusalem from his headquarters on the Mediterranean: a grand military parade with Pilate in the lead astride his mighty war horse.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, Jesus and his disciples are making their way down the Mount of Olives. And Jesus sits astride not a mighty war horse, but a young colt. Maybe it’s a donkey, but that’s a detail from Matthew and John. Maybe it’s a small horse. But the point is that it would have made a comic scene: Jesus with his legs stuck out so that they don’t drag on the ground, the colt trying to buck him off because he’d never had a person on his back before, the disciples working hard to keep man on beast.

It’s a comic scene because maybe Jesus is poking fun at the pretensions of the Romans marching into Jerusalem from the west. And it’s a prophetic scene as well because Jesus is suggesting that true power – Godly power – is reflected not in the military might of Rome but in the humble servanthood of Jesus: who brings good news to the poor and healing to the sick and sight to the blind, and tries not to call too much attention to himself in the process.

But now the disciples are calling attention to him; and they’re being rather loud about it. Luke says, “The whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen.” They’re not shouting, “Hosanna!,” but they are shouting, And here’s what they’re saying: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” And, in an interesting twist on Luke’s birth narrative, they add, “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.” Which, of course, sounds a lot like Luke’s angels announcing Jesus’ birth: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors” (Luke 2:14). The point is that true peace – heaven’s peace – comes not in the form of Roman soldiers holding violence at bay with their weapons, but in the form of a tiny baby now grown to be a humble servant, who calms the demons of poverty and disease.

So, first of all we have this comic parody of the Roman military parade and with it the prophetic proclamation of what constitutes true power and peace.

Secondly, we have Jesus’ disciples making a bunch of noise. And some Pharisees getting uptight about that. All of this noise has attracted a crowd, and Luke tells us that some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” Only Luke has this detail. Just as Luke alone has some Pharisees coming to Jesus some time earlier and warning Jesus that Herod wants to kill him. Which suggests that now, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, these Pharisees are worried about Jesus and they’re trying to be helpful. They realize that Jesus and his disciples are crashing the Roman military party, and they’re concerned that these merry-makers are drawing too much attention to themselves.

In other words, they mean well. It appears that Jesus had some allies among the Pharisees. They actually had a lot in common. They loved God, cherished the law, and rejected Roman authority. They had more in common than we usually think they had, because their apparent differences were amplified and embellished by the early Church.

To be sure, they didn’t agree on everything. The Pharisees had a stricter interpretation of the law, and Jesus was more open about his opposition to Rome. And that’s what’s got the Pharisees nervous here. They don’t agree with Jesus on some things, but they don’t want to see him get killed. So they’re saying to him, “Tell your disciples to cool it, for crying out loud. They’re going to get you in trouble!”

But Jesus will not let the Pharisees rain on his parade. It would be impossible in any event. The cat’s out of the bag. The inbreaking of God’s kingdom has become clear. Roman rule is doomed. Injustice is doomed. The false peace that is enforced by the point of a sword is doomed. These things may not end tomorrow, but the end is not in doubt. All Creation is bringing forth this new birth of faith and freedom and liberation. *All* Creation! That’s why the stones would cry out, even if the disciples could be silenced.

Which is to say that Jesus is either crazy or courageous. He probably knows that he’s not going to get away with this. If the Romans haven’t heard of him yet, they will have by the end of the day. Word will surely get back to Pilate about this prophet who mocked him on the east side of town. Thus Jesus’ refusal to silence his disciples and try to slip beneath Pilate’s radar is actually an act of great courage. To be crazy is to be out of touch with reality. But Jesus has no illusions about what’s happening, and about what will happen come Friday. He is very much aware of reality, and he’s forging ahead: marching straight into the storm with his eyes wide open.

The late biblical scholar, William Barclay, makes the point that there are two kinds of courage: there’s the courage that comes over you in a crisis when you don’t have time to think, you just do what must be done immediately. This is the courage of someone who runs into traffic and grabs a child who’s about to be hit by a car. But then there’s the other kind of courage, when you see danger from afar and you have plenty of time to think about whether you’re going to confront that danger, or avoid it. And you decide to confront it.

This is the courage of Jesus on Palm Sunday. This is the courage of Jesus during Holy Week, and during the many weeks leading up to it. It’s been some time since Jesus “set his face toward Jerusalem.” He’s had lots of time to think about the dangers that would confront him in the Holy City. But he never turns his face away. He continues to journey steadfastly toward his rendezvous with the Cross.

This is the courage of Jesus. And this is the courage to which Jesus calls the Church. It is the courage that seeks to complete the mission, no matter the dangers that stand before us; no matter the forces that seek to oppose us. The spirit of secularism would prefer that we not shout out Jesus’ praise. The spirit of cultural Christianity would prefer that we name Jesus as much as we want, so long as we don’t name the powers and principalities that oppose his Kingdom: racism, economic inequality, devaluing people simply because of the person whom they love.

There’s lots of fear standing in Jesus’ way as he comes off the Mount of Olives and enters Jerusalem. It’s the fear of the Romans and the religious authorities who are afraid of losing their power. It’s the fear of the people who are afraid that if Jesus and his followers rock the boat too much, lots of folks will be killed and the Roman repression will just get worse. And maybe there’s some fear among Jesus and his disciples as well; it’s buried within them and later in the week it will come to the surface. But for now, there’s so much excitement that the fear has been chased away. For now, there’s so much hope that fear will simply have to take a back seat. The Kingdom of God has reached Jerusalem: in the form of a ragtag bunch of merry-makers. Who are encouraging the people to laugh at the pretensions of power? And who will not let fear crash their party. Amen.