

Sermon by Rev. Anthony Weisman – April 13, 2024
Luke 19:28-40
Living With A Sense Of Radical Openness To Good Surprises

You think you know what you're in for. You think you know exactly how it's all going to go. You've been to one Palm Sunday worship service, you've been to 'em all. You know? The opening hymn will be "All Glory, Laud, and Honor." The choir will process in singing it, with kids leading the way; some of them, the older ones, like, the fifth graders, will already be too cool for this and will think they're going to die of embarrassment and will want to kill their parents for making them march around in circles and will be looking down the whole time and waving their palms with the most half-hearted, sulky waves imaginable.

But the smaller kids will be very excited to be entrusted with, to have in their hands something which can be turned against their brothers or sisters and used as a weapon. (The reason we use the full palm fronds we do and not the single palm spears that traditionally get folded into crosses is because it's a lot harder for pint-sized assailants to poke their siblings' eyes out with these. Instead, they have to settle for trying to tickle the back of the head of the person in the pew in front of them without their parents or anyone seeing.)

So there will be palm fronds. There will be trumpet to give our worship a fittingly regal air. The scripture reading will be the same scripture reading it always is: the story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey as the crowds waved palm branches and cried, "Hosanna!" and cheered. Even the one thing that might take you a bit by surprise – the explosion of noise-makers and confetti cannons, even that you'll be prepared for. You'll know to expect it. Last year I forgot to warn the congregation ahead of time and one little boy was so scared that he burst into tears; and I have never felt more like a monster as a minister – literally, making children cry!

You think you know what you're in for. You think you know exactly it's all going to go. And then the story isn't *quite* the story you expect. The story *isn't* the same story it always is. You might have been too busy tickling the back of the head of the person in the pew in front of you with your palm frond to notice, but: This story of Jesus's triumphal entry up the winding paths, through the hilltop gates of the holy city of Jerusalem – this story appears in all four gospels. And while the retellings of it are more or less the same from gospel to gospel, each gospel-writer – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – each of them does put their own twist on it.

This morning's scripture lesson, the account of the first Palm Sunday procession from the Gospel of Luke, has some small differences that set it apart from the others. For starters, there are no palms! In Luke's gospel, no one is waving palm fronds. Palm fronds are actually only mentioned in the Gospel of John; in the Gospels of Mark and of Matthew, people have "leafy branches" from "trees in the fields" – which doesn't sound much like palm fronds to me. In Matthew, the branches are big enough that people can't just break them off, but have to take tools and climb up and cut them. (We definitely don't want small children sword-fighting with *those*.)

But, as we heard read earlier, in Luke, there are no branches: no big, sawed-off ones, no small ones, no leafy ones, no fan-like palm ones. There is not a palm frond in sight. Also, there is no donkey. There is no hee-hawing to be heard. Instead, there is a colt. In Greek, the word is *pōlos* –

think: polo. The word *can* be used of a young donkey. It can be used of a young *anything*, although, generally, it's a young horse that's being described. In Matthew's gospel, there are two animals, a donkey (a full-grown donkey donkey) and a colt. In Mark's, like in Luke's, there is just a single colt, a young *something*. John, in his gospel, maybe embarrassed that Matthew, Mark, and Luke seem like guys you couldn't trust to know one animal from another to get them into an ark in a timely manner – John clarifies things and uses the *actual* Greek word (there is one) for a young donkey.

Okay. To recap: In Luke's gospel, on Palm Sunday, there is no waving palms and no riding donkeys. There is also no shouting, "Hosanna!" *Hosanna* is an all-purpose, happy exclamation, sort of a synonym for "Hallelujah!", a religious "Hip, hip, hooray!" But, in Hebrew, literally, the word means, "Save us!" *Hosanna* is both a cry of desperation and a cry of praise.

In the other gospels, in the gospels of Matthew and of Mark and of John, when the crowds shout "Hosanna!", they are both cheering Jesus on, celebrating his coming as he rides into Jerusalem, *and* begging him to help them, to free them, to *save them*. A subjugated people greet Jesus as a liberator, a deliverer. In the other gospels, they shout "Save us!", and they address him as the "Son of David", as one born of that ancient, royal line. They hail him as the "King of Israel" and shout about the "coming kingdom of [their] father David" – which they believe Jesus will reestablish after he leads them in revolting against the Romans who have occupied the Holy Land for decades.

In Luke, there's none of that, and here's why: The gospel-writer, Luke, was writing for readers who lived in major cities all around the Mediterranean and who, by and large, were Romans, were Roman citizens. They were Christians, but they were also Romans. Before they had been baptized, they were just your ordinary, normal, friendly neighborhood Roman pagans – not Jews. So they had no interest whatsoever in Jewish revolutionary movements led by heirs to the Jewish King David's throne, or in Jewish attempts to take back control of Jerusalem, or in Jewish rebellions against Rome. They *were* Rome!

And so Luke edited out of his gospel anything and everything that smacked of Jewish nationalism, anything and everything that would offend the sensibilities of a good, patriotic Roman Christian. Jesus *is* welcomed as a "king," but he is a king with no kingly ancestry; he is a king with no kingdom. As if to emphasize that Jesus is the king of an otherworldly realm, that he is the king of their hearts, perhaps, the people cry out – and this echoes the angels' song of "peace on earth" over the manger in Bethlehem – the people cry out, "Peace in heaven!" In Luke, the Hebrew people don't cry out, "Hosanna! Save us!" – because the gospel's first readers would not have understood why or from what the Hebrew people would want to be saved. Surely not from Rome!

Luke's Palm Sunday procession isn't much of a Palm Sunday procession. No palms! No donkeys! No hosannas! I know, I know, you're thinking: What's next? Is this guy going to try to tell me that the donkey – excuse me, the colt – wasn't *really* pulling a cart with a pipe organ in it playing "All Glory, Laud, and Honor" now? ... The last thing that sets the retelling of this story in the Gospel of Luke apart is actually not something that's missing from it, but something, or rather, someone, *someones*, who are there but shouldn't be.

Luke's gospel is one of two that places the Pharisees, the stock, go-to, handlebar-mustache-swirling, muhahaha-ing bad guys, at the scene. And it's the only one that has them step out from the shadows they're lurking in and go head-to-head with Jesus. "Teacher," they say, "order your disciples to stop!" "Tell all these people to shut up!"

Given that, again, in Luke's gospel, Jesus's entry into Jerusalem is presented not as a march against Rome but a parade on a pleasant spring day, and that the people are all shouting "Peace! Peace!", the Pharisees come off less as scheming, evil villains and more as grumps and killjoys, as *religious* grumps and killjoys – which are the *worst* of all grumps and killjoys. They hate parades and the sound of children's laughter. These are the kind of people who wouldn't be happy working as tasters in a pie factory. They're born crying, live complaining, and die disappointed. Not coldblooded killers, but not a good look, even so.

This is the last appearance they make in Luke's gospel. But – and I think this is interesting, this is the point, maybe: Did you know that Luke's gospel has a sequel? The Book of Acts was written by the same author and addressed to the same readers. Luke picks up in the Book of Acts right where his gospel left off, and he continues on telling the story of Jesus's life, only, now, Jesus's life isn't only his life anymore. In some mysterious sense, Jesus is alive in his followers. He lives in them as they live their lives. The Book of Acts tells the story of how Jesus lives in them and lives on in them as they live their lives.

And in the Book of Acts, Pharisees make big appearances. And you think you know what you're in for. You think you know exactly how it's going to go. Pharisees are gonna Pharisee. They will be cynical, hardhearted, and closed-off. They will be smug and superior and certain about everything. They will be anti-Jesus and anti-mercy and anti-joy. *That's who they are.*

But then, that's not who they are. Or, at least, that's not the whole of who they are. Early on, in Acts chapter five, one of them, a Pharisee by the name of Gamaliel steps through a lynch-mob coming for Peter and the apostles. And Gamaliel shows himself to be kind and wise. This Pharisee, Gamaliel, saves them – saves them in a way that, otherwise in the Book of Acts, only angels, angels from above, ever save them. This Pharisee, Gamaliel, is their guardian angel.

Later, in Acts chapter 9, another of them, another Pharisee, has a dramatic experience of a holy Presence beyond any explaining, and he dedicates his life to serving it, to serving that Reality which is more real than reality itself. You know this Pharisee as the Apostle Paul.

It's almost like: With God, with Christ, you never really know what you're in for. Like: With God, with Christ, it never goes exactly how you know, how you just *know*, it's going to go. A prayer is answered that you had long ago given up hoping would ever be answered. Or it suddenly makes sense why another prayer, the truest, deepest prayer you ever prayed, was *not* answered; and you come to understand and to thank God for saving you from what might have been. Or you can't believe a lot of the things you always thought, growing up, you were supposed to believe, and you find that your faith is actually deeper and stronger for that. Or, in spite of all the many, many fine reasons for not believing in God and for staying far, far from church, you almost can't help but believe or sort of believe anyway. Or you make a change in

your life that, inexplicably, you know you are being led to make. Or you are happy again, when you never thought you could be happy again. Or you come to be free of something that you never thought you could be free of. Or your story isn't turning out to be the story your parents wrote out for you, or that *you* wrote out for you – and you can see the mercy in that.

Trite as it can seem, there's a lot of truth in the line: "If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans." With God, with Christ, we live, we always live, with a sense of radical openness to good surprises – to grace, to miracles, to transformation, to life not going the way we thought it would, even to death not going the way we thought it would. But that's skipping ahead to next Sunday, to Easter Sunday....