

Lead On, O King

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Luke 19:29-41

No one has to tell you these are shrill times. This is an election year and the voices clamoring for our attention are difficult to hear. Some of us are taking a break from reading the newspaper and listening to the news, because the news seems just so discouraging, and loaded with strife.

In our Gospel passage Jesus tells two of his followers to get a young donkey from a village ahead of them. Jesus and his closest followers were going to Jerusalem, and Jesus wanted to re-enact in a different way what was a familiar sight to all the people in Jerusalem.

I say a different way. You see, the Mount of Olives is due east of the city. Farther east are a few small villages like Bethpage and Bethany. Then still farther east there's an arid desert that drops over two thousand feet in elevation down to the Jordan River Valley. Jesus was coming up from the Jordan River Valley to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. He was making an entrance from the east.

Pilate (and the Roman leaders before him) made their entrance from the west. That's where the port city of Caesarea named after Caesar Augustus. I believe both Pilate (and his predecessors) and Jesus' procession involved palms. Waving them was the way the people hailed a new ruler. Pilate came on a chariot or a steed, a war horse. Jesus chose a donkey. Taking their outer cloaks and putting them on the road for Jesus to walk over them was a way the people showed respect, and affection.

Luke says the disciples, not all the people, shouted God's praise. Kathleen read the psalm they were reciting. Jesus told the Pharisees who were concerned that he may get in trouble for all the praise that was going on that even the stones would cry out if the people weren't allowed to praise God.

After the parade Jesus speaks words about the ways that make for peace. It is unique to Luke, and, I believe, it is the point of the parade. Jesus *is* a king. But a

king who comes on a donkey instead of a chariot or horse, who comes from the east instead of the west, and who comes not with the weapons of war but the ways that make for peace. Praise, humility, and recognizing Jesus as the king is what Palm Sunday is about.

These are truly times we hear of wars, and rumors of war. In my own City of San Bernardino last Sunday a 12-year old was killed and his 14-year old cousin was injured by gun fire. ISIS, the Taliban, Boko Haram, al Qaida and Al Shabab are terrorizing portions of Asia, east, west, and north Africa and the Middle East. Gang violence is up, and we are reviewing law enforcements actions and their equipment needs in light of the December 2nd shootings. We live in violent times. And here's a Savior who chooses a donkey, a few disciples and a message of peace to enter the seat of power.

It's a bit comical. It would be like a newly sworn in President choosing a beat up, Ford Mustang for his or her inauguration instead of a limo. Jesus' entry was not to celebrate a glorious past but to inaugurate a different kind of future. Israel never knew empire except under Solomon, King David's son. But a new Son of David has come with the ways that make for peace. Those ways are praise to the God of life, humility by giving up the trappings of power, and Jesus in own person who brings the ways that make for peace. We need a different kind of power. We need a different kind of Savior. Jesus offers himself as a substitute for the way things are.

We cast our lot with this king. No American has ever paid homage to a king. A king in the biblical sense is both a representative and a caregiver of the people. He is not a tyrant. But one who leads by example and gives himself for the life of the world.

I am told the last time a British king ever personally led his nation in battle was in the 1730s. Jesus led his people in battle beginning on Palm Sunday. He wasn't content to let someone else face down evil. He faced down evil himself. He invites us to do the same.

I suspect our response to this is, “Who am I? I am not Jesus.” I may have his Spirit living in me but I am not sinless like he was. Follow Jesus the king anyway. Admit your separation and missing the mark over and over again. But follow anyway.

I face the difficulty of weekly conversations with the people who hang out around our church campus. The so-called homeless like Billy, Rebekah and someone whose name I keep forgetting. She’s back after 21 days of successful rehab. The consistent voice of Jesus is “don’t walk around them but up to them.” The consistent voice of Jesus is “don’t get hung up on their stories but keep challenging them to find a better way than living outside.”

This week I am thinking of taking electronic charging privileges away from one person but inviting her to use our bathrooms as an incentive for her to take action to find a home. The police say she’s been on the street for two years, so her transient habit is ingrained. I don’t know where it will take me or us as a church. But the important thing this week is to go where the king leads.

This king leads us in three ways.

The king leads us to triumph. This is very hard to remember in these shrill and violent days. For many of you a favorite song, which we haven’t sung for a while is “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee.” Its last verse goes:

Mortals, join the happy chorus which the morning star began;

Love divine is reigning o’er us, joining all in heaven’s plan.

Ever singing, march we onward, victors in the midst of strife,

Joyful music leads us sunward in the triumph song of life.

Our king could let whatever life and evil was going to do to him to come because he knew whether good or bad, the triumph song of life would prevail. It was “for the joy set before him he endured the cross” says the writer to the Hebrews of Rome. All that he did, and all that we do is much bigger than ourselves.

Richard Rohr, the Franciscan, describes it as “getting into the Flow” because it is the river of God that continues no matter what other people and life does to us.

The king also leads into the unknown. I made this point last week but I do believe it’s essential: Jesus did not know clearly that death was coming five days later. As he instructed his two disciples to go to the next village and get a donkey he knew he was going into the face of power. But no fully human person knows the exact details of his death. Jesus’ full divinity did not over power his full humanity.

As I talk to our 7 or so homebound (who are able to carry on conversations) it’s clear they are more aware of the unknown than many of us are. And yet those who cannot physically come to worship carry their future with remarkable grace. They find new friends. They find new interests. I’ve learned some love chocolate milkshakes, others classical music, others newspapers—almost all of them enjoy the flowers which Izar delivers after they adorn this Sanctuary. Our king leads us into the unknown with prayer for his closest followers, a servant heart that wanted to wash his closest follower’s feet, and even a passion for righteousness which made him clean out the temple when he saw it being abused. This king goes into, and leads us into the unknown.

The king leads always leads to eventual triumph. The king leads us to the unknown. And the king leads us into the depths of human pain.

I am thankful for Brief Statement of Faith of our denomination which says “Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain.” The very next line is “and giving his life for the sins of the world.” At age 58 and with a lot of baggage from my fundamentalist past I’ve stopped trying to figure out **how** it is that Jesus’ crucifixion was “for the sins of the world.” (At last count there were about 40 theories how this is so.) But it means more and more to me that this king lead us in “suffering the depths of human pain.”

There are no depths you and I can go where this king hasn’t been—not in illness, rejection, loneliness or fear. There is no pain we experience that the Spirit of Christ within us can whisper “you’re on your own there.” Our job is to cooperate with grace whether that comes in the form of doctors, medications, counselors of

all kinds, stories of redemption and good advice. But at the deepest, there is still love, and that love cannot let us go, because our king has gone into the unknown.

The other day for the first time that I can remember I walked out of a movie. It was trying to be a spoof on action adventures. But I experienced it as foul and making light of the things that make for peace. This week, you'll need to walk out of your usual patterns to find a king who knows triumph, the unknown and yours and mine depths. There's no place you can go that the king has not already been. We come out the other side with news too stunning to believe. Come back next week. Amen? **Amen.**