

“Cloaks and Stones”

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Rachel Knuth

Community Church of Sebastopol

Palm Sunday (Year C): Luke 19:28-40

April 10, 2022

I.

Every year during Passover the Roman governor would ride up to Jerusalem from his coastal residence in the West. Riding a war horse with imperial majesty, the point was to remind the Jewish people that Rome was in charge.¹ Sure the Jews could gather for their Passover festivities, but the governor was there in all his glory to make sure they knew the Roman authorities were the boss of them, and the military was out in full force. Pontius Pilate arriving in Jerusalem with fanfare?--that's the parade that is planned for this day.

The parade that isn't planned for this day, but which we celebrate on Palm Sunday, is the “other parade.” The spontaneous one with Jesus approaching Jerusalem from the East, on a donkey, with a rag-tag group of followers shouting, “Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest!” They must have just cut branches from nearby trees, because now they're waving palms. They're taking off their cloaks-- I know we think of coats, but these are like capes that keep the sun and sand off-- they're taking their cloaks and laying them down in the pathway of the donkey. The Pharisees grumble to Jesus, “Tell your disciples to stop,” and Jesus responds-- “If I did, even the stones would cry out.”

When we celebrate Palm Sunday we are claiming the prophetic underdog tradition of the Christian faith. There have always been loud imperial voices (even--maybe especially-- within Christianity) which have aligned with political rulers because they value worldly power. But we knew way back at the beginning of Lent, when Jesus is tempted in the desert, that Jesus is the kind of leader who resists malignant power. All the kingdoms in the world can't tempt him to be that kind of king. So when he makes his way into Jerusalem he arrives on the scene with humility, love, and sacrifice-- all the opposite qualities of what's expected. And yet, all the qualities we as Christians find worth following.

II.

But it's definitely an uneasy kind of parade we celebrate. There's a certain dissonance in knowing that Jesus is riding toward Good Friday. But probably the most uncomfortable part about it is that we

¹ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan

can't stop the forward momentum of crucifixion. The theology of the palms and the passion translated into real life means that even though we might wish we could take away the pain of people we love, sometimes all we can do is walk alongside them. This can cause an inward heartbreak, and it hurts. The way forward to Easter is through the valley of the shadow.

So as much as we'd rather wave palms, and then skip to the part where the sun rises on the empty tomb and we get to wear pastel colors and eat honey baked ham, as much as we'd rather go from one celebration to the next, if we did, we would truly miss a paradox of our Christian faith— a paradox that ironically might help us make sense of the hurt we experience in the world: that in Jesus, despair and hope ride the donkey together into Jerusalem.²

III.

Jesus approaches the towns of Bethany and Bethphage, and the people from these towns are the ones who provide him with a donkey. Literally, the names “Bethany” and “Bethphage” mean “House of Figs” and “House of Unripened Figs.” I can't help but think back to the parable of the fig tree, and imagining that these are communities that have mulched their fig trees with plenty of manure, they've watered suffering into their roots, and let it change them and grow. They've learned how to metabolize grief. And now the fruit they bear is the ability to release a colt— they have the capacity to be able to offer a valuable, young, working animal to the cause of Jesus. They only ask, “why are you untying it?” and then it's freely given.

And upon this freely-given donkey, freely-given cloaks are placed, and Jesus is helped up onto the animal. The people remove their cloaks— the very action like an unveiling— for now they're exposed to heat, sun, and the stinging of sand when the wind blows. Their own bodies are uncovered, and their layer of protection lays on the ground. Having lived through years of Roman occupation, the scars of oppression written on their bodies may now be seen by everyone. These are the people celebrating the unsanctioned parade— the poor and outcast. They are the ones who lay their cloaks on the donkey to cushion the ride for Jesus, and on the ground to create a soft landing place for donkey hooves. It's a scene of both exposure and comfort.

Yesterday I attended a Bat Mitzvah with my daughter for one of her friends— it was a beautiful service— I don't know how many of us here have attended a Bar or Bat Mitzvah before? It's a coming-of-age ritual in the Jewish tradition. All the other ceremonies I've been to have happened on

² Frederick Buechner

site at Nir Shalom in Cotati or Congregation Shomrei Torah in Santa Rosa—this one was held under the redwood trees in a gorgeous setting out near Guerneville. The young person read her Torah portion from a 550 year-old scroll from Czechoslovakia. Her family was there, generations of people handing their faith and traditions to the next generation to carry it on. And the Rabbi was so fascinating, Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb— I mean, you know clergy people like to check out each other’s style, and I was thrilled to watch her in action— she had silver hair that went down to her waist, had studied under Reb Zalman, and was one of the first women to be ordained a Rabbi. I went home and found one of her books on my shelf, I knew her name was familiar! Anyway in the middle of the Bat Mitzvah she said something so profound about how Love can be manifested in our world, she said, “Love can only be realized with Justice.” And she talked about Justice for the Earth, Justice for human beings, for all creation. So yes— we can show Love through comfort, through the laying down of cloaks in all the ways we do, to care for others— but we also need Justice.

As the Palm Sunday scene unfolds, we have the Pharisees complaining about the disruption. I mean if anyone’s worried about optics, it’s going to be the Pharisees. They know Pontius Pilate is coming into town from the other side, and they just want Jesus’ followers to be quiet. But when they complain to Jesus, he quotes another prophet, Habakkuk. Habakkuk is a prophet who talks about how terrible it is for the rich to build wealth at the expense of other people, especially the poor. Habakkuk says that the very houses of the rich will scream because of injustice. His words are, “the stone will cry out from the wall, and the beam from the woodwork respond.” This is where Jesus is coming from when he tells the Pharisees, “even the stones will cry out.” He’s saying that resistance to injustice cannot be silenced— not by Pharisees, not by Pilate, not by anyone. For truly, our Christian faith calls us to cry out when confronted by injustice. Because working toward more equity in our world is a way to show Love.

How will we know that we are on the right track? One way we know Christ is moving in us and in our community, is when we move toward places of crucifixion in our world. Not that suffering shouldn’t be alleviated wherever possible— it should always be relieved when it can be. But when we can’t stop the forward momentum of crucifixion, as followers of Jesus we are called to ride towards it. Some of us rode toward suffering this week when we learned of the death of a friend’s husband and held her in our hearts. Some of us spread cloaks when we accompanied a loved one to have their chemo port installed. Some of us cried out like stones in the days leading up to Justice Kentanji Brown Jackson’s confirmation as the first Black woman to sit on the Supreme Court. We know we are on the right track when we see the forward momentum of crucifixion, and we respond with cloaks and stones.

IV.

A couple of weeks ago I received a cold-call in the church office from a member of the community. Sometimes people in the area call the local pastor when they are experiencing anguish and pain. I did my best to offer comfort and referrals for care. After speaking with this person, at the end of our phonecall, they said, "I just want to let you know how much your church means to me— all the work you do in the community with the safe parking program and other good work" And then they said something so profound. They said, "You make Christianity a verb."

I reflect this back to you as we prepare to follow the donkey into Jerusalem. We are a church that regularly spreads cloaks of comfort, and cries out for the rights of the poor. We are riding toward crucifixion as a broken, hungry, hopeful people, doing the best we can. Our task this week is to steadily ride forward with Jesus. To steadily ride forward with Love.

Welcome to Holy Week.