

Sunday of the Passion – Year C – March 28, 2010
Luke 19:28-40; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 22:14-23:56
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Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of the most holy week in the church's worship calendar. It is the week when we follow Jesus' steps in Jerusalem. We will wash each other's feet and taste the Last Supper with His disciples. We will hear the agony of His prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane. We will share in Jesus' arrest and trial before Pontius Pilate, and the violence of His brutal death on a cross. We will watch as His body is buried in a tomb. All this and more, before we rejoice in the Paschal mystery and celebrate the victory of His glorious resurrection. How we experience the triumph of God's love is going to be different for each one of us. Simply because of the dynamics of our lives, there is an act of faith and inherent unpredictability each time we give ourselves over to these concluding days of Lent. All the hours and weeks of our Lenten preparations lead us here. Luke helps us to tread slowly, as he scrupulously details the action for us in today's Gospel reading.

"Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek but a means by which we arrive at that goal," says Martin Luther King. It seems that the things that make for peace are most visible upon reflection, as if they are too blindingly obvious in the moment. Or perhaps because divine peace is so incongruent to our own definition of peace, we resist. Our resistance blurs the best part of our vision, sharpening our focus on selfish desires, whilst making Godly truth fuzzy and surreal. Nonetheless, even when we are blurry-eyed and hard of hearing to the fullness of God's peace, the reality is always available to us, but perhaps not in the way that we expect. If we read this passage too literally without recalling the Messianic prophecies from the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as the story of Jesus' life, we might even think we have strayed into the *Twilight Zone*.

Whether or not Luke was a physician, he writes with exquisite surgical skill. Each movement in the story has purpose. Each word and phrase builds on the overarching themes of the whole account. No detail is without merit or meaning, allusion or allegorical significance. The clarity of Luke's thought helps us to recognize the importance of this divine message in our lives. From the beginning, Luke emphasizes the centripetal power of Jerusalem. For Luke, Jerusalem is the nexus point for divine-human contact, and central to God's plan of salvation. Yet much of what we learn about this city comes in the form of a lament on the lips of Jesus. Luke's account is not without critique or comment on the cosmic implications of Jerusalem's stubborn defiance, her anxious and power obsessed leaders, and the people's inability to welcome their true king. As Luke reminds us in almost every line of this reading, the evidence of Jesus' identity as Messiah, prophet, and king is overwhelming.

Jesus comes to Jerusalem from the East, approaching from the Mount of Olives, which in the prophetic tradition is the place where Messiah will appear. He sends two of His disciples to bring the colt He will ride into Jerusalem. Since this is the first time Jesus has used any means of transportation other than His own two feet, so we can be sure that the colt has significance. Remarkably, the colt is mentioned five times in this short passage! And we can glean at least five good reasons for this. Firstly, a colt tied to a vine is also found in the Book of Genesis. It is at the point when Jacob calls each of his sons to him for his blessing including Judah. The prophets tell us that the Messiah will be from that tribe. Here's what it says in Genesis. "Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine and his robe in the blood of grapes" (Genesis 49:11). The inference is that the owner of the colt is wealthy. Jesus, on the other hand, has nowhere to lay his head. In fact, He must borrow the colt on which he rides into Jerusalem. Once again reinforcing Luke's vision of divine favor oriented towards the poor, and those on the margins of society. Fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah, the colt is described as unbroken, one that has never been ridden before. Thirdly, Jesus has instructed the disciples to respond to the colt's owners with the words, "The Lord needs it." In effect, Jesus' rights as defined by his identity as Lord supplant all human rights of ownership. Jesus *is* Lord of all, and we are merely stewards of God's good gifts. Since the disciples

find the colt precisely as Jesus has said they would, Luke affirms Jesus' own prophetic power, and the fidelity of Jesus' prophetic words. Finally, in accord with Zechariah's prophecy, Israel's king rides into Jerusalem in humility on a colt. No high horse is necessary for this king to prove his status as royalty. No warhorse is needed to herald a military victory, as would be the way for the Roman leaders. Just a colt, and the One riding it whose victory is won through the power of love and the things that make for peace. The crowd spread cloaks on the path before Jesus -- a customary greeting for a royal figure. But where are the palms? Did you notice that there is no mention of palms being waved or strewn about in Luke's account? This too is significant. There are no palms, and therefore for Luke, no nationalistic implications to Jesus' kingship. From the very beginning, Luke stresses the universal gift of salvation for all who believe in Christ Jesus. Jesus, who dies under the title 'King of the Jews' is the Savior of the world and welcomes Jew and Gentile alike into His kingdom.

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!" The song that the disciples sing comes, in part, from Psalm 118. Luke inserts the word "king" into this psalm to ensure that we understand he is using it for its original purpose as a royal entrance hymn. He adds the blessing of peace, which forms a neat bookend to the first chapter of Luke when the angels herald Jesus' birth as a time of divine favor and peace on earth. We are meant to see what the people of Jerusalem have steadfastly refused to acknowledge. Jesus is God incarnate, and the time of divine visitation is about to be rejected. In Jesus, God's purpose is manifest. The invitation is written boldly in the Word made flesh: Come, be part of God's salvation. At Jesus' birth, He brings peace on earth. In this chapter of the Gospel, it is peace in heaven. Divine intention is revealed in Jesus, the Messiah, who is God's reconciling presence sent from heaven to earth. The crowd sings of Jesus as an example of peace through His deeds of power, without recognizing in Him **their** invitation to accept the gift of divine peace. To those who wish to silence the disciples' praise, Jesus speaks of the stones. Not some devilish trick, or a trip into the *Twilight Zone*. These are the stones from which John the Baptist tells us God can raise up children of Abraham. These are the stones that Jesus refused to turn into bread, resisting the devil's temptation to use His power for selfish gain, as He began His long journey to Jerusalem. Ironically, even if the people of Jerusalem fail to recognize their Savior, Lord and king, the inanimate stones of creation will sing His praises.

Luke describes the disciples' praise as joyful, a celebration of all the deeds of power that they have seen through Jesus' ministry. These are the deeds of power that make for peace. The acts of divine grace to the people of a hurting world, and the same gifts that we too are called to offer in Christ's name. Throughout Luke's Gospel, we read of Jesus' gifts of teaching, healing, and of release from the prisons of sin that enslave us. We see Jesus giving life and hope where there is only death and despair. He feeds the hungry, and spends time with society's outcasts, restoring their dignity and drawing them back into the life of the community of faith. In the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus continues to be the means by which you and I, along with the whole Body of Christ, work towards God's goal of peace on earth as it is in heaven. Throughout all time: all ages past, present and future, Jesus alone shows us what freedom truly is, and all that God has defined as the things that make for peace. He alone gives us the peace of God that passes all understanding, and empowers us to continue His mission of peace today.

Sing out praises to God! Welcome Jesus today and everyday! Share Christ's peace always!
Amen.