

Isaiah 40:1-7
Psalm 118:1-4, 19-21, 22-25, 26-27, 28-29
Philippians 2:6-11
Luke 13:31-35; 19:28-42

The Hearts of Palm are Burning **April 1, 2007 Palm Sunday 2007**

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Last night I dreamed of a series of palm trees, scattered in irregular lines in the adjacent backyards of several middle class homes. It was night. The heart of each palm was burning, a section of the tree below the leaves and above the trunk, glittering with prescient fire, like embers ready to leap again into life. I share this image with you because, dreamt on morning of Palm Sunday, it struck me the image may be relevant to others than myself.

Bringing together Jesus' lament over Jerusalem in chapter 13 with the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem offers a unique look at the beginning of Holy Week. Although Luke suggests Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem may have covered a more extended period than a week, we see the journey toward Jerusalem through particular theological glasses. At the end of chapter 9 in Luke, we're told that Jesus set his face toward, resolutely determined, to journey to Jerusalem. He sent messengers ahead, apparently to see where he would be welcomed and where he would not. This is Luke's editorial framework for the gospel. No other evangelist frames the story quite this way.

Between chapters 10 and 19 [known as the Great Insertion], Jesus travels from village to village on the way to Jerusalem. During the journey, he sends out 72 disciples to do as he has done, visits with friends, like Mary and Martha, he prays, he debates Pharisees and scribes who invite him to dine with them, he does some healing [only 4 miracle stories are in this long section: a woman in the synagogue, a man with dropsy, a healing of the 10 lepers, and a blind man at Jericho], and towards the end of the journey, he tells the disciples for the 3rd and last time of his coming suffering and death. But mostly, along the way, Jesus teaches.

It is in this section of the gospel that some of the most famous gospel stories appear, most of which are unique to Luke. Without Luke's gospel we wouldn't have these stories. Among these images unique to Luke is the image of Jesus who laments, even cries, over the fate of Jerusalem and his inability to avert its destruction. By the time Luke was writing, Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans, the Temple was gone – never to be rebuilt – and the Jewish people, including the Jews that accepted Jesus as Messiah, had been scattered throughout the Hellenistic world. Jesus' lament was only too real to Jewish Christians in Luke's audience.

In chapter 13, we don't know exactly where Jesus was on the journey, but he's approached by some Pharisees who warn him Herod plans to kill him. It's unclear whether they warn him away to get rid of him or because they are sympathetic, perhaps even disciples. He tells them to tell Herod that the threat of death does not deter him. It is his destiny. He must go to Jerusalem. He acknowledges he is a prophet when he says, "It is not possible that a prophet should die out of Jerusalem." Then, in a lament, he mourns Jerusalem's impending doom, Jerusalem where prophets are killed and the ones "sent" are stoned. Comparing his love for Jerusalem's children, to that of a mother hen who gathers her brood under her wings, he describes his "longing" to gather Jerusalem's children under his metaphorical wings. Jesus' use of feminine imagery to describe himself is powerful at our time in history when church authorities have forbidden the use of feminine images for God in worship.

But, in this scene, Jesus also describes his failure. Jerusalem would not have the protection he longed to give. Jerusalem was "unwilling" to receive the word from God that might have spared them the fate he foresees they will suffer. The scene concludes with an allusion to Ps 118. Jerusalem will not see him until it is able to say, "Blessed is the one who comes in God's name."

The story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem brings this last line to life. A whole multitude of disciples gather along the road, welcoming Jesus as royalty. In Luke (only in Luke) they call Jesus "king". Although there is no mention of palms waving, they spread their cloaks on the road for him to ride over them, as if laying a royal carpet. They praise him with joy for his mighty deeds. They sing, "Blessed is the king who comes in God's name". When some Pharisees tell him to rebuke his disciples, Jesus tells them it's impossible: even if they were silenced, the very stones would sing! It's a joy-filled triumphant scene.

Had Jesus been a king in the common sense of the word, had he been a Messiah in the commonly expected sense, he might have rejoiced with them, savoring the moment of triumph as one of success. Instead, Luke describes, he wept. As he drew near a place on the Mt of Olives, from which he looked down on the city, he wept. He wept not for himself, but for the city, for Jerusalem. And as he cried, he said "If only you knew what makes for peace! But it is hidden from your eyes." We're not told how this multitude of disciples responded to his tears, but Jesus wept. For him, the entry into Jerusalem signaled, not success, but failure, his inability to call Jerusalem to the conversion that might have saved it from its devastation.

In an ironic way, Luke's version of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem, his first visit since childhood according to Luke, is a message of hope to us who have the benefit of hindsight which Jesus' disciples did not. We already know how Jesus' life will end. We have a whole, different perspective at our disposal from which to grasp the meaning of Jesus, a better opportunity - one might say - to get it "right", to know what really makes peace, to know what God hopes for us. We have the privilege of knowing that Jesus perceived that he failed. His hope of turning hearts to a new way of peace did not capture the hearts of the religious leaders of his time. They chose instead a path to their own

destruction. Their rejection of Jesus is symbolic of their rejection of the prophetic message, sent to them by God through Jesus. The hearts of palm were burning.

So, when we are despondent over the state of the world, we can take comfort that Jesus, too, experienced this despondency. Not even Jesus was able to protect the world he loved from its fate. He longed to protect his world as we long to protect ours from the wars and devastation of the environment which have potentially drastic and devastating consequences, not just for ourselves but for our whole planet. If we weep in grief for the unresponsiveness of our leaders to the signs of warning in our times, we know that Jesus wept too and weeps with us now.

When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, in Luke, he went directly to the Temple, engaging in the dramatic action of driving out those selling animals for sacrifice in the Temple, demanding that God's house be – not a house of sacrifice – but a house of prayer. This prophetic act no doubt sealed his fate with the priestly caste of his time and the wealthy class of Sadducees that supported the Temple cult.

We do not know how the story of our time will end; but, like Jesus, we must forge ahead, speaking God's truth to the powerful in our church and our world. We must not be silent. The earth itself, the very stones are crying out. But we go forward reassured that, if we do what we can, if we call our church and world to conversion, the rest is up to God. If we can't avert potential disaster, it is God's work to convert tragedy to new life. But maybe yet we can. The hearts of palm are burning.