

Marching Orders

sermon digest

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Luke 19:41-42, 45-48

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This is a day that makes ministers shudder. On the one hand, it is a high, holy day that focuses on the very heart of the Christian faith. On the other, for those of us who combine Palm and Passion Sunday, it is a day on which in the brief space of an hour, we must go from the highs of triumph to the lows of seemingly utter defeat. For that reason, the Gospel according to Luke is a good jumping off point, for his high is not so high. As a matter of fact, reading his rendition of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is something a little short of triumphal. Mary Hinkle Shore goes so far as to suggest that if the preacher is following Luke, she should go for a sermon that is merely “subdued yet hopeful, rather than ‘triumphal’”, although I’m not supposed to tell you that up front.

Luke, you see, gives the barest rendition of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem of any of the Gospels. He includes no “hallelujahs,” no branches, no palms, and despite one designation of Jesus as “king,” no reference to David or the throne of David. He even paints a different crowd. In Mark and Matthew, the throngs who have gathered for Passover take note; and in John, the crowds surge forward to celebrate the one who raised Lazarus from the dead. But in Luke, the crowd is restricted to those who accompany Jesus. Having witnessed the gracious deeds he has performed along the way to Jerusalem, they shout and sing, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

Hardly are the words out of their mouths, however, before the tide turns, for Luke inserts a poignant scene none of the other Gospels include. As he nears the city, Jesus weeps. “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!” Placing his words and his seeming prediction of the tragic destruction of Jerusalem in the context in which Luke is writing, what Luke gives us here is a full blown lament on the order of those of the psalmists and prophets of Hebrew scripture. Writing perhaps as little as a decade after Rome had utterly destroyed the city (70 CE), Luke shares the utter heartbreak of the devastation that has taken place. Far from a vengeful Jesus spewing words of hatred and vengeance, what we have here is pure grief. Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem, whose very name means peace, is, Fred Craddock insists,

a voice of love and profound caring, of vision of what could have been and of grief over its loss, a tough hope painfully releasing the object of its hope, of personal responsibility and frustration, of sorrow and anger mixed, of accepted loss but with energy enough to go on *[Interpretation: Luke, 228]*.

“Love . . . profound caring . . . loss . . . tough hope”—hear the words, and hear the deep, deep passion. What we have here is not self-satisfaction of having been proved right either on the part of Jesus or on the part of Luke. What we have here is not one who has identified his own people as the enemy of God. What we have here is the words of a prophet, profoundly in love with his people and his God and pained to the depths of his soul at the tragedy being played out before his eyes.

Notice that Luke says Jesus goes directly to the temple and begins driving out the merchants operating there. Notice, too, the abbreviated story. Luke makes no mention of Jesus overturning the merchants’ tables or going after them with whips. The words Jesus uses are the words used previously as Israel’s prophets lamented the hypocrisy their fellow countrymen who mistreated their own people and then presumed upon the safety of God’s house. Like thieves retreating to the safety of their caves or dens to plot their next move, they went to the temple with the arrogant boast, “This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD,” (*Jere. 7:4*). Nothing, they assured themselves, can harm us here.

Tradition has prepared us to interpret Jesus’ actions in the temple as a problem “back then.” The problem, we assure ourselves, had to do with money changers who cheated the people and merchants who passed off inferior sacrificial animals on an unsuspecting public—this despite the fact that the best historical evidence we have speaks to the careful regulation of these temple activities by the authorities. Or we assure ourselves that Jesus was merely signaling the fact that the temple and the faith of the Jewish people were becoming passe—this despite the fact that the temple is cast in a positive light as Luke opens with Zechariah in the temple, closes with the disciples “continually in the temple blessing God,” and in Acts places Christians in the temple in prayer every day. This, too, in spite of the fact that Jesus returns to the temple to teach each and every day.

Jesus was not cleansing the temple as one who despised it and sought to destroy it but as one who loved it and sought to purify it. Houses built for God, then and now, pose a blessing and a danger. Presuming upon the guarantees our places and practices of worship give us, we, every bit as much as the Jews of the first century, need to be on guard, lest our presumption become a cover for our heartless disregard for the critical needs and issues that swirl around us.

Luke, Thomas Long points out, tells us that “a nearly forgotten Christmas card fell across the path of Jesus as he rode down from the Mount of Olives” [*Christian Century*, 3-21-01]. Reminiscent of the angels’ song at Jesus’ birth, the disciples cried out, “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” “Luke, Long goes on to say, “wants us to know that these words we so cheerily send to each other at Christmas come with a Good Friday price.”

The words sung at Jesus’ birth are now marking his path to Calvary. The angels’ cry of “Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth! Good will to all people!” was not merely a birth announcement but a set of marching orders to which Jesus was obedient throughout his life.

In that first century world dominated by the ruling hand of Rome, cries for peace, though dangerous, were also welcome. And so it is with us. The drumbeat to which Jesus moved is no less the drumbeat for his church today. As you read Luke further, you will observe that the peace of Jesus is not the peace of withdrawal, but the peace of engagement. It is not the disingenuous peace of complacency that brings solace by merely chanting “peace, peace when there is no peace.” “Everyday,” Luke assures us, Jesus returned to teach openly in the temple. Each day, he confronted the questions and addressed the conflicts that ate at the lives of the people who gathered to hear him. And so it must be with his church.

“The miracle of the Red Sea,” the rabbis taught, “is not the parting of the waters. The miracle of the Red Sea is that with a wall of water on each side of him, the first Jew walked through.” The implications of this trusted teaching, Sister Joan Chittister tells us, are clear:

God is not in this alone. Yes, God may be all-powerful and eternally unfailing, but that’s not the point. The real key to the coming of the reign of God on earth . . . is not God’s fidelity. The real determinant between what ought to be and what will be in this world is the mettle of our own unflagging faith that the God who leads us to a point of holy wakefulness stays with us through it to the end. The key to what happens on earth does not lie in God’s will. All God can do is part the waters. It lies in the courage we bring to the parting of them. It lies in deciding whether or not we will walk through the parting waters of our own lives today. Just as surely as there was need for courage at the Red Sea, just as surely as there was need for courage on Jesus’ last trip to Jerusalem, there is need for it here and now, as well [*National Catholic Reporter*, 3-30-01].

In all honesty, we would all probably prefer a different world—a world in which the problems are not as thorny or contentious as those swirling around us now. We would also probably prefer a different gospel—one that delivered us into a sweet peace blissfully ignorant of those problems or at least not responsible for addressing them. But that is not the way it is in the company of the one who set his face to go to Jerusalem. With him, we encounter the messiness of working in love on behalf of a real, not an imaginary peace. With him, we sit at table with those whom our world most loves to exclude. With him and because of him we put ourselves in the middle of the fray whether it concern HIV/AIDS, poverty, healthcare, racism, sexism, homophobia or battles over our shared national budget.

Frankly, it is disconcerting. Just when we are ready to settle in for a pleasant, quiet, “spiritual” gospel, we are called to face up to reality and find ourselves

in a crowd on the noisy, sweaty road to Jerusalem, caught between the Pharisees and Jesus. Caught between the keepers of the system and the word of God. Caught between the stability of the past and the painful beginning of a new future where, deep down, we know we hear the deniers denying him and mourners crying for his absence and the question hanging in the air: Who will cry out? Who will cry out? Who will cry out? [J. Chittister].

Will I? Will you? Or will we leave it to the stones?