

Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, March 20, 2016  
Text: Luke 19:29-40

# A Grand Entrance



First United  
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

203 Wisconsin Avenue | Madison, WI 53703

608-256-9061 | [www.fumc.org](http://www.fumc.org)

There may have been two grand entrances during that week in Jerusalem, the beginning of the Passover celebration. The first is the one we know well and have venerated by singing about glory, laud, and honor, waving palm branches, and shouting hosannas. Here comes Jesus entering the city through a gate in the eastern wall, riding on a donkey. The donkey is a deliberate choice that Jesus makes. Luke uses a full six verses, half of the passage we read, detailing Jesus' instructions to his disciples about where to find the donkey and what to say to the owner.

Riding a donkey is a sign of peace, of humility. We can imagine Jesus riding on this beast of burden, bending his knees to keep his feet from dragging on the paving stones, his head at eye level with those standing along the way. There is no formal entourage, no platoon of disciples marching two-by-two down the street to clear the way for the conquering hero, no drums, no trumpets (or trombones, tubas, and French horns, for that matter). Just children waving palm branches, women and men throwing their cloaks on the street to provide an impromptu carpet, the devoted ones shouting, "Hosanna!," that is, "Please save!"

It is a distinctly political moment, "political," and act of "the polis." For one bright, shining moment, the people have hope that things will be better. Here comes their savior who will expel the Romans, reestablish home rule, and inaugurate a new era of prosperity. What is going through Jesus' mind as he rides along the way? We do not know, but we are sure that he sees the truth ahead . . . the truth of betrayal, arrest, accusations, lacerations, and crucifixion.

The other grand entrance that week may well have come at the other side of the city, through a gate in the western wall. Here enters Pontius Pilate, riding not on a donkey but a war horse, escorted by soldiers brandishing their Iron Age-best spears, maybe drums and trumpets, augmented by shouts of loyalty from the elite and well-established. Perhaps there is a red carpet unfurled to cushion the steps of the steed. This, too, is a political moment, a show of power and privilege intended to keep the rabble under control during Passover. Pilate must not let anything upset the uneasy peace dictated by Roman control.

The collision course is set. Remember that one of Pilate's justifications for crucifying Jesus is that it is better that one may die than the whole city spiral out of control. The two grand entrances will merge to become one defining act with several scenes: the Last Supper, the prayer and arrest in the garden, Peter's denial, Herod's interrogation, Pilate's concession to the will of the mob, the crucifixion, and finally, but not today – the resurrection, when people will shout, not "Hosanna!," "Please save!," but "Hallelujah," "Praise the Lord!"

We tend to glamorize this Palm Sunday entrance and want to follow it directly to the new life of Easter. After all, what we read in Luke is a fulfilment of a glorious prophecy in the Book of Zechariah, a prophecy no doubt Jesus knows by heart as he instructs his disciples to get the donkey waiting for him. "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth." (9:9,10)

Should it not go like clockwork? The first sign that it will not go smoothly comes at the end of our passage when the Pharisees, offended by the protests of support for Jesus, instruct him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." "Get them out of here, get them out." And Jesus responds, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." The shouts of truth and goodness and justice and mercy cannot be silenced by heavy-handed thugs trying to keep everything under the tyrant's control.

This is a political showdown between the people and the privileged right out in the streets of the city; this is the result of two grand entrances, one from the east and one from the west, meeting in the middle. And we know, as we read ahead, power and privilege will lose out to love and righteousness, but not easily and not right away.

What does Jesus do next after he dismounts from his donkey? He weeps over the city. He weeps because the people do not know what makes for peace. Maybe he does not weep so much for those who cheer him along his way, though they are naïve and misunderstand the nature of God's power. But certainly, he weeps for all of the people who line the road over at the west gate to praise the power of Caesar.

Then, Jesus goes to the temple. Traditionally, when a conquering hero enters a city he goes to the temple and extends an offering to God in thanks for victory. But Jesus enters the temple and begins to drive out all of those who are exacting inflated prices for animals to be sacrificed on the altar, taking advantage of the faithful pilgrims, desecrating the holy precinct. And then, what does he do? He stays in the temple day and night and teaches the people the ways of God, certainly warrant enough in the eyes of the establishment to have him killed.

His message is a political one; it is all about how we are to live together as a people. What makes for peace? A stronger army? Higher walls? Gated communities? An expulsion of outsiders? A purge for purity's sake? The rich getting richer? The strong getting stronger?

No, his alternative definition, his subversive view of the world, insists that true power comes from forgiving, relinquishing one's privilege, forgoing violence, loving without limit, and trusting in God, even if it means death, as it

certainly will for him in just a few days. Foolishness, Jesus the holy fool, and yet, that is the message that the stones shout out.

What a strange image, shouting stones. We hear it at the beginning of Luke's gospel when John the Baptist tells the ancestors of Abraham that their pedigree is not good enough for salvation. God can create sons and daughters of Abraham out of these stones of the wilderness, he proclaims. God's love and justice are embedded in the very stuff of creation itself.

But here, when Jesus answers the Pharisees with the same image of stones shouting out it has a prophetic reference that is even more condemnatory of the powerful and privileged than John's. Surely, Jesus knows the vision that the prophet Habakkuk sees. It is God speaking, "Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith. Moreover, wealth is treacherous; the arrogant do not endure." (2:4,5)

God is just getting started, according to Habbakuk's witness. God condemns all those who heap up wealth that does not rightfully belong to them. "Alas for you who get evil gain for your houses, setting your nest on high to be safe from the reach of harm." You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life. The very stones will cry out from the wall, and the plaster will respond from the woodwork."

What an image . . . the very stones of the house walls of those who have bilked the poor and endangered the weak will shout out in accusation. And it is such stones as these, Jesus tells the Pharisees, that will condemn them and their puppet Pilate and their strawman Herod.

The story of Holy Week has just begun, and we will not finish it until next Sunday, with much important to tell during the days in between. But let us get our bearings for this week by going back to Jesus' birth in the form of a poem by Richard Wilbur, a great poet and interpreter, at one time the poet laureate of the United States. It brings the crying stones forward from birth to death to new life in "A Christmas Hymn."

A stable –lamp is lighted  
Whose glow shall wake the sky;  
The stars shall bend their voices,  
And every stone shall cry.  
And every stone shall cry,  
And straw like gold shall shine;  
A barn shall harbor heaven,  
A stall shall become a shrine.  
    This child through David's city  
    Shall ride in triumph by;  
    The palm shall strew its branches,  
    And every stone shall cry.  
    And every stone shall cry,  
    Though heavy, dull, and dumb,  
    And lie within the roadway  
    To pave his kingdom come.  
Yet he shall be forsaken,  
And yielded up to die;  
The sky shall groan and darken,  
And every stone shall cry.  
And every stone shall cry  
For stony hearts of men:  
God's blood upon the spearhead,  
God's love refused again.  
    But now, as at the ending,  
    The low is lifted high;  
    The stars shall bend their voices,  
    And every stone shall cry.  
    And every stone shall cry  
    In praises of the child  
    By whose descent among us  
    The worlds are reconciled.

Amen.