

Gates Presbyterian Church *Just Looking Around*
Palm Sunday

March 28, 2021

This morning, as we celebrate Palm Sunday and prepare to enter Holy Week, I invite you to mark the conclusion of our Lent of Listening by listening deeply to our story. As we follow the familiar contours of this moment, it is easy for our minds to wander away from something we know so well. The challenge is to stay present and listen for what new wisdom God is calling us to hear.

Let's start by setting the stage a little bit and imagining for ourselves what it is like to be there in Jerusalem on this day. Walking up the cobble stoned paths of the city, or following a dusty road from outside Jerusalem, everywhere we look we see small celebrations beginning. People are gathering to remember the Exodus and the days when God freed the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. In these days, all the celebrations center around the Temple, home to all the holy festivals of Israel.

Women are gathering food for the Passover feast, greeting one another in the street and leaning together over the stalls of the market vendors. The men who escort them are greeting each other too, exchanging news of the day and looking forward to the shared meal and the retelling of the story.

But the joy of this occasion is marred by the highly visible presence of a new imperial power that dominates life for God's people. In these days, it is all too easy to imagine the lives of their ancestors, enslaved in Egypt and longing for freedom, and we cannot help but notice that, in many ways, not much has changed for the people of God.

The very high priests who will themselves lead the Temple celebrations are appointed by and collaborate closely with the Roman governors. The resulting Roman presence is undeniable and demands attention.

As we approach the Temple, we notice that armed imperial soldiers stand watch on the porticos, looking down on the faithful as they enter the Temple Mount so that even as the people celebrate their liberation from oppression, they must do so under the watchful eyes of a new oppressor.

We can feel the tension beneath these two opposing realities. The Roman authorities will allow the people to celebrate freedom only while reminding them forcefully of their current imperial bondage. This causes anger and frustration among the people. As we approach the Temple, we hear snippets

of conversation – “Look – the soldiers are back! They do not believe in our God. They have no business being here.

Their presence in our Temple desecrates the whole place. How can we celebrate freedom when they insist on intruding with such visible power into our sacred space.

Why can't they leave us alone. We know we have no power, we don't need them to remind us that we are still not free!”

Even as the people are preparing for worship, there are rumors that Pilate is entering the city by another Gate, lauding his power and might with a big procession of his own that highlights his authority and his ability to control all that goes on around him. He represents the mighty power of Rome and he will not let anyone forget it.

Now a new energy draws our attention down the hill. Amidst the smaller conversations and celebrations, something larger appears to be happening. Jesus and his followers are entering the city too. Under the cover of the Passover celebrations, Jesus comes the closest he will ever come to playing the role of a traditional king – the king the people of Israel have long expected; a king whom they hope will rise up and throw off the oppressors.

In normal times, any such procession would have immediately resulted in a crack down from the Imperial Guard, but today, Jesus can disguise his prophetic act as part of the expected celebration accompanying this high holy day.

He is wily about how he does it. Riding in on a donkey, he nods his head toward the familiar prophecy from Zechariah, “Behold, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he.... Humble and riding on a donkey.” (Zech. 9:9) He is a people's king, not a military ruler on a great high horse pulling a chariot of war, but a rebel who rises up from the people to challenge the powers of oppression, riding on a humble donkey. As the faithful spread their cloaks on the ground and bring branches to pave Jesus' way, we are reminded also of the prophet Elijah's protégée Elisha, who anoints Jehu to lead the charge to overthrow Ahab and Jezebel.

All the signs are present. Jesus is not who his enemies claim. He is something more than a simple carpenter from Nazareth; he is more than a charismatic man whom people with no better options like to follow; he is more than a stirrer-up of controversy in the Temple.

This Jesus has something prophetic to say. This Jesus just might be the real deal. But he is going to surprise us because, despite his allusions to past prophecies about the coming king, he is anything but routine, this Jesus is completely unexpected. And he is going to turn the world upside down.

As we stand there watching the parade unfold, we don't know it, but there has been some behind the scenes work going on to make this moment possible. Later, Mark's gospel account will describe what took place that day even before Jesus came into view:

1 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, [Jesus] sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" ⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" ⁶ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

"Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

The shouts of Hosanna have echoed up to us now and we see Jesus and his followers coming up the hill. We don't have branches ourselves to lay on the ground, but we follow Jesus into the Temple and what happens next feels unexpected. Mark finishes the day's story this way:

¹¹ Then Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

I don't know about you, but I am feeling surprised. Oh - not surprised by the rather mysterious acquisition of the colt (for our people borrow from one another all the time); not surprised by the big procession with the garments

and branches (for who doesn't like an excuse to celebrate); not surprised even by the triumphant shouts of Hosanna in the highest heaven (for we all know that our God is a great and mighty God). No, the thing that catches my attention is a small thing that happens as the day comes to an end.

“Then Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and *when he had looked around at everything*, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.”

Jesus looks around at everything. And then he goes away.

Jesus has just participated in a rather dangerous moment of prophetic action during which he implies to many of us gathered that he comes as the king – a claim in direct opposition to the Roman rule made visible all over the city. Coming on any other day, Jesus' arrival like this with a crowd around him would have resulted in the soldiers being called out to put down the insurrection his entrance would have been understood by the Romans to represent. On this day, though, Jesus can disguise his subversive action in the context of the Passover celebrations, allowing him to ride into town on a wave of support mimicking the procession of a rebel king on his way to overthrow the powers that be.

Yet when he arrives at the Temple, he does not build on this moment. As we are standing here – aren't we expecting him to speak? A crowd has followed him. He has been heralded with shouts of praise and honor. A way has been paved so his feet need not touch the ground. Isn't the logical next step a big speech?

But he does not immediately begin to teach and preach. He does not immediately begin to call out the leaders of the Temple. He does not immediately call people to account for their sins. In fact, he does not *immediately* do anything – a fact in and of itself which is interesting because when Mark later records all this in his gospel account, he seems to describe everything with some urgency – immediately is a big word in Mark's accounts of Jesus. It appears 40 times!

No – Instead, Jesus simply looks around at everything. And goes away.

Once again, this messiah who is not-the-messiah-we-expect is doing the unexpected. Standing here, I see Jesus taking his time, wandering about in a relaxed and curious manner, gazing around at everything around him. As I watch, he moves from place to place like one does in a museum, anonymously

and quietly taking in all there is to see: the detailed carvings in the outer courtyards; the imperial guards on the portico; the high priests bustling about making everything ready for the Passover. His eyes follow the movements of the money changers and the sellers of animals for Temple sacrifices. He pauses in a corner, observing all the every day practices that make up life in the Temple.

But he makes no comment. Even the gospel writer later adds nothing to his description. Jesus just looks around at everything. And, after seeing all this, realizing it is late, he simply returns to Bethany with the twelve.

It's a bit of an anticlimax, isn't it. Jesus comes riding into the city to shouts of celebration but once arrived, instead of further announcing his kingship or proclaiming his new status as leader of the community, he just looks around and goes away again. And we are left standing here wondering -

What kind of Messiah is this? He didn't even *do* anything!

Of course, now we know this apparently passive stance does not last – we remember that the rest of the week is packed too full of action for us to even process all at once. Action that is heartbreaking and filled with anguish and dark despair. Action that also moves, only a week later, to unbelievable news of resurrection and new life.

But in this moment, Jesus is once again quite quiet and unassuming. He seems to be without a crowd around him and I am reminded of the many times when he draws apart to pray. Times when he separates himself in order to prepare for more ministry.

What is this moment of contemplation about for Jesus? Amid so much activity its silence stands out to me – a calm at the eye of the storm.

And maybe that is it. This silent contemplation – accomplished with no editorial comments or fanfare – stands in stark contrast to all that happens next. This pause creates a space, allows a breath, before the world goes mad and so much is lost. It serves in its way to highlight the frenetic activity of the week to come.

Far from being fooled into thinking the whole enterprise has fizzled out, we can recall how, the next day, his quiet looking clearly now a thing of the past, Jesus will act decisively in a way that directly pits him against the Temple leaders – those high priests so deeply entwined with the roman authorities.

Any subtlety that attended his entrance into Jerusalem will be cast aside as Jesus leads an open revolt against the Temple leaders – a revolt for which he will pay with his life.

Indeed, after looking around, and sleeping on what he has seen, Jesus will leap into the week we now call holy, without Palm Sunday's reserved demeanor. Cursing a fig tree on his way over, he will enter the Temple and immediately turn over all the tables. Mark will report on that: "he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷ He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."

Standing here as witnesses, we note that Jesus' actions are not about rooting out corruption but instead are a direct indictment of the common practices of Temple life. Practices about changing money so that believers can purchase an animal to sacrifice at a time when many of them don't have enough to eat themselves. Practices about centering Temple life and rituals at a time when God's people are crying out for freedom and release. Practices about tithing when many of the faithful live a subsistence life that often doesn't even stretch to cover the cost of a cloak.

We rarely see Jesus overcome with emotion, but on this day, he is so angry that he turns over all the tables and refuses to let anyone even carry anything through the Temple. The rest of the week will not get any better and Jesus will continue to get in more and more trouble with the Temple leaders until he generates enough commotion that they demand his life.

We will follow that part of the story through holy week on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, but today, I want to pause here, in this moment before the world erupts, when Jesus is looking around. And I particularly want to wonder together – if Jesus were to arrive in our community today, what would he see as he looked around at the end of the day and made his way home to sleep?

Where would he see our leaders collaborating with the powers that oppress?

Where would he feel anger at business as usual?

Where would he call us out for following old ways that fail to serve all those in our community?

What prophetic truth would Jesus proclaim when tomorrow begins?

And how would we respond? Would we too turn from shouts of “Hosannah” to cries of “crucify him”? Would we join Jesus in crying out for justice or fall silent, afraid of what sacrifices God might require of us. Would we defend the status quo and return to business as usual, or would we observe those overturned tables and reflect on new ways to organize and live out our life in community?

As we conclude our Lent of Listening, let us remember that part of listening is also seeing with clear eyes what is happening around us. What Jesus shows us on this Palm Sunday is the reality that even those things we hold dear and honor as the right way to do things might appear to be virtuous and defensible behavior, but may at times actually represent a collaboration with the powers that oppress and marginalize the vulnerable in our society. He reminds us of the importance and power of taking the time to look around at our world and of paying attention to what we see.

As we prepare to enter Holy Week and to stand witness to the deep hatred played out in the torture and death of Jesus, let us pledge to continue to listen deeply to one another. Let us pledge not to turn away when we realize that our customary practices harm people we are called to protect. Let us promise ourselves that we will speak and hear the prophetic truths God calls us to understand. Let us commit to becoming active participants in God’s healing plan for the whole world.

Jesus invites us now into Holy Week. He invites us to walk with him through the pain and betrayal of his final days, just as he walks with us through the pain and betrayals that we encounter, so that, together, we may arrive next Sunday at the glorious celebration of Easter, truly understanding what it means that Jesus has died for the world and now has risen again.