

For What Might Have Been

Luke 19:28-44

READ Luke 19:28-40

For the last year or so, we have really concentrated on the Gospel of Luke. We did an extensive study of Luke in the Sunday morning Bible study, and then followed the Lectionary as it explored this book for the whole time between Pentecost and Advent. As we have observed many times before about this Gospel, Luke is not just cobbling together facts, he is telling a story. And this story – the story of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ on earth – had been pointing toward this moment for a long time. It had been clear to Luke’s readers – if not to the people who were actually living out the story – that Jesus was headed for Jerusalem, and big things were going to happen there. Someone reading the story for the first time, not knowing how it was going to turn out, would have been like the disciples and the other participants, thinking that this was truly a triumphal entry of the Messiah into the city.

The promise of this day would have taken Luke’s readers back to the beginning of the story. Back to the great Magnificat of Mary, in which she sings “He has performed mighty deeds... scattered those who are proud... brought down rulers from their thrones”, and to the words of Simeon when he saw the infant Jesus at the Temple: “For my eyes have seen your salvation... a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” They would have been thinking about the extraordinary truths and insights in His teachings, and about the miracles they had seen. They would have been reminded of His commitment to justice and mercy, and to His determination in the face of opposition. Now this story was coming to a powerful climax.

It had all the markings of a triumphal entry – fulfillment of prophecy, adoring crowds, streams of followers. We sing about it – “Waving the branch of the palm tree, high in my hand. One of his heralds, yes, I would sing: loudest hosanna, Jesus is King.” The road they were on from the Mount of Olives had a panoramic, spectacular view of the entire city of Jerusalem. What a great place for a celebration!

But right there is where the mood of the whole day takes a dramatic turn. In a scene that only Luke records, Jesus stops the parade in its tracks. He looks out over the city of Jerusalem, and weeps. That is not the reaction that anybody expected, and it is a part of the Palm Sunday story that we may overlook.

READ Luke 19:41-44

Unlike the participants in the story, we know the whole story, as did Luke when he was writing it. For people who know the whole story, the idea of Jesus weeping at this point may seem even more strange. We know that this week is going end in true triumph, with the glory of the Resurrection. Shouldn't this have been a time of celebration? But we also know that there are going to be parts of the days in between that are truly horrible, that demonstrate the very worst that mankind had to offer. We understand that Jesus knew the whole story, too. The anticipation of it would have been a terrible thing to bear.

But that is not why Jesus was weeping over Jerusalem. He was not weeping for what was about to happen to Him, and he was not weeping just for those inhabitants of Jerusalem who would do those things to Him. He was not weeping just because He could see the coming destruction of the city by the Romans – something that would not happen for more that 35 years hence. Jesus was weeping because He could see exemplified in Jerusalem at that moment the faces of all those people who would miss the coming of the Messiah – who would miss the possibility of salvation – and it made Him sad in a way that we can barely comprehend. He was weeping because He could see all those people who had been challenged to real discipleship falter and run away. The God who loved us so much that He gave up being God for a time and became truly human and lived among His people and offered Himself as the perfect and complete and sufficient sacrifice for all our sins looked past what He knew was coming in the next few days and saw the consequences for the lives of those who would reject Him, and was moved to tears.

This is important, because it was not just the future of the people living in Jerusalem at that moment that brought Jesus to such sorrow. It was the future of all people in all of time, including today, including right now, who would turn away from the Gospel, who would reject God's offer of forgiveness and grace, who would miss freedom from the power

of sin in this life and continue to live in struggle and turmoil, who would miss freedom from the power of death and find themselves in eternal torment, separated from the spring of life. What did Jesus see in Jerusalem that unleashed that flood?

Jesus saw in Jerusalem secular and political leadership as both institutions and individuals that was so consumed by the imperative to self-preservation that they ignored the guidance of God for governing. That leadership had power and they liked it and would do whatever they had to do to keep it, even if it meant shoving aside God's direction for a government of justice, mercy, respect, and care. In the coming days, we would see Herod grasping for any outcome that would save his skin, and Pilate willing to put a man he knew to be innocent to death to keep order in his city.

Jesus saw in Jerusalem religious leadership as both institutions and individuals that had claimed for itself the authority to make the rules for being in right relationship with God. They had layered on interpretations of the basic commandments, and set themselves up as the final decision-makers on all things pertaining to a person's relationship with God. That authority gave them power and prestige, and they liked it every bit as much as the secular authorities. In the coming days, we would see them react to the challenge of Jesus in matters of interpretation of Scripture and the law of Moses by having Jesus put to death. He was upsetting the status quo, causing people to question their leadership and teachings, and risking the relationship they had achieved with the government by just going along to get along.

Jesus saw in Jerusalem people who were going through the motions of worship without getting to the underlying relationship with God, people who were unwilling to think for themselves, people who were so complacent that they refused to seek the Word of God, people who were willing to accept injustice and oppression and fear. In the coming days, we would see them at their worst, allowing themselves to become no better than a lynch mob.

As the disciples and followers of Jesus paused with Him at the top of the hill, and looked over Jerusalem for themselves, they did not see any of that. They just saw the cheering crowd, the Pharisees huddled in the corner, and a city ripe for conquest. What

Jesus did there challenged them, challenged their way of thinking about Him, about Jerusalem, about themselves. But if we respond to the invitation of Scripture to put ourselves into the story, the most difficult place is not there on the hill with Jesus, but in Jerusalem. If Jesus paused to look over our city or our state or our nation, would He have the same reaction?

Would He see political leadership motivated most strongly by self-preservation, not seeking God's direction, not governing by Biblical principles?

Would He see religious leadership willing to compromise the faith to gain membership, willing to keep quiet on issues of justice and mercy and hunger and peace to avoid rocking the boat, internally divided over issues with no eternal consequences?

Would He see people going through the motions of Christianity, doing things because they seem like the right thing to do or because it makes them feel good about themselves, or doing their own thing and ignoring God altogether?

This event should cause deep self-examination in us as a nation, as a church, and as individuals. If we do that honestly, we can't help but acknowledge our shortcomings and failures at all those levels, and recognize how far we are from the nation, church, and people that God made us to be – to recognize that God can look over us and be disappointed to the point of sorrow - and then to recognize that God loves us too much to leave us there. What caused Jesus to weep over Jerusalem was not so much the condition that He found them in, but that they were missing in that very moment His offer of love and mercy and forgiveness and grace that would heal their relationship with God and make them whole. We are in the same moment, called to recognize the magnitude of the grace of God to offer us a way to overcome the barriers created by our sin, offered salvation and freedom and abundant life and eternal life – wholeness and oneness with God. We are offered the opportunity to not be people that Jesus weeps over because of what might have been, but to be people saved by grace. This is for us, for you, for me, now. Hear all that for yourself, and be healed and whole in the grace of God.

Amen.