



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Everyone Loves a Procession

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

March 28, 2010
Palm Sunday (Year C)

Luke 19:28-40

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After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying,

*"Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!"*

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

A couple of weeks ago, I was sitting with about five members of the Virginia State Police to plan the memorial service for their former superintendent and our wonderfully faithful member and friend, Denny Slane. Each of those troopers had a huge binder that contained what they were calling the “operational plan” for the service. Every detail was covered in that binder, from who would sit where, to how each person would enter the sanctuary, to how they would depart—every point that you can imagine—and about a hundred more—were outlined in excruciating detail so that things would go according to plan. As their chaplain told me, “I know it’s a lot of details, but we want to make sure we do our part to honor Colonel Slane.”

They took something to the nth degree what most of us know all too well: life is about details. “Phones that keep ringing, email that has to be returned, computers that

crash, copy machines that jam, and children who are sick when we need to be at work. We struggle with the details of bodies that don't work as they should, with doctors, specialists, medical tests and pills. Our children juggle homework, athletics, orthodontists and piano lessons."

"Then we go to church and what do we find but more details? Worship is filled with hymns and prayers, sacraments and readings, stuff to memorize and stuff to confess. The word 'liturgy' actually means 'the work of the people,' and our liturgy can seem like a lot of work."

And then we get to today—to Palm Sunday—and we read Luke's description of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem and there are enough details to satisfy even the state police. We are given the exact location—in the Jerusalem outskirts of Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives. And then we are given a word-for-word account of the preparations that Jesus wants the two disciples to accomplish.

Here's what he told them: "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here."

Jesus had clearly spent some time preparing for this day. He knows exactly what type of colt he wants—one that had never been ridden. He knows exactly where the colt is. He's even planned for the inevitable questions from those who would demand to know why the two disciples were "borrowing" somebody else's colt. "If anyone asks," Jesus tells them, "just tell them 'the Lord needs it.'"

Detail after detail—so much detail, in fact, that you have to wonder: why was Jesus such a perfectionist? Why doesn't he just ask his disciples to find him a ride into town?

Jesus cares about the details because he cares about the scriptures, and he remembers the prophet Zechariah's pronouncement about the long-hoped-for Messiah. Do you remember what Zechariah had said? "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." Jesus is determined to get his arrival into town exactly right, and Luke is determined that we know every detail of the arrival of our new king.

Whatever expectations of Jesus we cling to, in his telling of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, Luke wants us to recognize one thing: Jesus is the king. It's almost as if he's forgotten that Christ the King Sunday comes later in the liturgical year—at the very end. It's almost as if he's forgotten that Jesus is on the road to suffering and death, a suffering and death that will come into sharp focus later this week. But no matter how you turn Luke's story, it always shouts one thing: Jesus is the king. The colt, the spreading of garments, the psalmic shouts of praise, revised to add the word "king," all point to this procession as a royal one. Jesus' kingdom, indicates Luke, is an accomplished fact. And the disciples get it right. They see in this moment "the moment that interrupts time,"—the moment that makes a new future possible—a future in which God's reign is revealed. And, for Luke, it's this parade toward the cross that opens a new way of being in the world in

which the future is redeemed. This happens, says Luke, because the King has drawn near.

So what kind of king is Jesus? One thing's immediately clear—he's a king like no other. He's a king who laments over his city. He's a king who casts out symbols of economic power. He's a king who will not shrink from looking at the cross. "He's an inverted King Solomon." Everything we expect a king to be and do is overturned in Jesus.

Which begs the question: If Jesus' kingdom is accomplished fact, and Jesus is a king like no other, then what does it mean for us to declare allegiance to this king alone? What does it mean for our congregational life in the world to say that Jesus is our king? What of our other loyalties—national, economic, family? If we have indeed caught a glimpse of the true king, what kinds of lives should we live as that king's loyal subjects?

Those questions—and others like them—take on an even deeper meaning when we consider that there was another procession entering Jerusalem that day—a Roman procession marked by great pomp and circumstance, with the Roman proclamation that the one arriving in their procession—Pontius Pilate—was the real king—the very Son of God—the savior—the lord. In other words, you can't just jump on any procession that passes by, but you always have to figure out if the procession you're in is the one following Jesus.

You only figure that out, though, by noticing some of the details that Jesus didn't worry about. Unlike other kings, Jesus never worried about the detail of urgency. Do you remember when he was on his way to Jairus's home to heal his dying daughter, and he stopped to heal a woman with a chronic disease? He could have hurried past her to get to the crisis, but he didn't. "He was never a victim of the urgent demands of others."

He also didn't worry about the detail of effectiveness. Remember the parable he told of the sower who threw his seed all over the place, with only some of it falling on good soil? Jesus expects us to be faithful, not effective, because only God gives the increase; only God grants the success.

Jesus also didn't worry about the detail of popularity. Remember how great a disappointment he was to the Pharisees who wanted him to take a harder stand on sinners? Or how great a disappointment he was to the agenda of the Zealots? Or to his own disciples? Most of all, he was disappointment because he kept pointing to the detail of life in the kingdom of God.

Details that consume us, you see—like urgency and effectiveness and popularity—never crossed Jesus' mind, and we can easily overlook the details he was concerned about if we try so hard to save ourselves by controlling the wrong details that we have no energy left for the detail of recognizing the savior of our lives when he draws near.

Today, when we gather around Luke's detailed story of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, one detail catches my eye: some people in the city that day were wise enough to recognize the moment of their salvation. They cut down branches and spread them on the ground in front of him. Some even spread their cloaks on the ground as well, and they began to shout, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in

heaven and glory in the highest heaven!"

In a way, they jumped right back into the details. The singing of psalms was an act of worship repeated at every Passover and feast day. Every time the people worshiped, they worked through those psalms. Year after year, week after week, day after day they paid attention to the details of looking for a savior. And when the Savior came, some were ready.

Today we enter Holy Week—with Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday and Good Friday—and we know the details of all those stories. We've gone through them year after year after year. So why do it again this year? For the same reason we go through the details every Sunday. It's the only way we can take our eyes off the things that don't matter and set them upon the arrival of the Savior.

Our Holy Week journey will lead us to the Table, and to the Cross, and to the joy of Easter morning. It will be a week of raw emotion in which we see what happens to a king who rules not in power, but in the weakness of suffering and the cross. Dare we follow such a king? Dare we pledge allegiance to one who subverts the world we've grown accustomed to? Dare we trust in one who is concerned about entirely different details that most in the world? If so, then let us join our voices to the other disciples—and all creation—even the stones—as together they announce: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

Life is about details—but the best news is that once we've learned to look for Jesus, we'll find him in every detail of life.