

Ups and Downs

TEXT: Luke 19:28-42

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on April 2, 2023 (Palm Sunday)

The Mount of Olives is described later in Luke as a “Sabbath day’s journey” away from Jerusalem. That’s not very far. Sabbath laws permitted only limited travel because travel involved effort and the Sabbath was for rest. So, a Sabbath day’s journey was only about one kilometer or 2/3 of a mile. Like some of the other mountains we’ve talked about across Lent, the Mount of Olives is a ridge, rather than a single peak, rising to 2,684 ft. at the highest peak. It lies to the east of, and is adjacent to, Jerusalem’s Old City. If you go past the ridge further east, you reach the Judean desert.

The ridge was named for the olive trees that once covered its slopes, and, at its base on the Jerusalem side, is the Garden of Gethsemane, a name that means “oil press” in Hebrew. We’ll visit there at our service on Thursday night. The ridge is also a burial ground, dating back 3,000 years to the time of Israel’s first kings. Today it holds about 150,000 Jewish graves.

Since the ridge acts as a watershed, bringing water flowing down to Jerusalem but blocking its entry to the desert, the Mount of Olives is a very concrete and visible boundary between life in Jerusalem to the west and death in the desert to the east. Someone looking east literally can watch death happen as the Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea.

The city of Jerusalem has its own mountain—the Temple mount—but the Mount of Olives is 80 meters higher, all of which means panoramic views of the city, and the temple mount in particular from the top if you look west. You will be taken up for that view if you tour Israel today. I’ve been there. If you head south, you’ll eventually get to the place where the ridge drops off to the road from Jerusalem down to Jericho, where Jesus sets his story about a Good Samaritan. We know from the stories leading into this that Jesus has just been in Jericho and so has likely climbed up the ridge from the south.

Jesus would have traveled this ridge frequently from the other direction as well, since it’s part of the route from Jerusalem south to Bethany, home to the siblings who were close friends of Jesus: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. In fact, in the account of the passage from Luke that Kim just read, Jesus is near Bethany and on the Mount of Olives when he sends two of his disciples to a nearby village to get the colt for him to ride into the city.

It likely was not some prophetic miracle that Jesus knew there was a colt nearby. The home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus was his home away from home when Jesus came to Jerusalem, so he would have known well these villages along the way. And they would have known Jesus. Once the colt’s owners knew who was taking it, all was well.

The story of what we now call the “Triumphal Entry” of Jesus into Jerusalem appears in all four gospels with variations. The location is the same. But you’ll notice in Luke’s version that on this “Palm” Sunday, no one is waving any palms. Nobody shouts “Hosanna” either, although they do shout a passage from Psalm 118, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” The crowds thronging the way in Luke are singled out as his disciples, rather than random crowds.

The animal Jesus rides in Luke is described only as a colt, and the Greek word there can be either a horse or a donkey. Much has been made about how warriors come into the city on horses and the symbolism of Jesus on a donkey, showing that he is not coming in to overthrow Rome but comes in peace. And that may well be. Other gospels make a bigger deal of the donkey, even implying there might have been two donkeys. But Luke has a detail that no other gospel includes, which is often a tell for what this particular writer thinks is important.

Here’s another Bible study rule, especially when dealing with stories that are told in more than one place. The things that will yield the most interesting questions are not the parts of the story that are the same, but the parts that are different. In this case, the significant difference is a pause in the parade down the mountain.

Jesus is descending the ridge toward the city, and as he gets to the scenic overlook—the place where you get the full and splendid view of Jerusalem and, especially, the Temple Mount—Jesus pauses the procession and he weeps over

the city. Matthew also tells that story, but it comes several chapters after the triumphal entry, not in the middle of it. Why does Luke put it here?

As Jesus weeps, he is not focused on his own fate, but on the fate of this beloved city, the capital established by Jesus' ancestor David, which still, after a thousand years, can't, in Jesus' words, "recognize the things that make for peace." As a result, Jesus predicts the city will fall to its enemies. That prediction comes true about 40 years after Jesus' death. As he sees the city, he knows both its past and its very predictable future, and the grief of the impending loss is overwhelming.

What strikes me about the way Luke combines these stories is the way that positioning opens up questions about Jesus disciples, even here going into the last week of Jesus' life. Palm Sunday is a happy day in the life of the church. We had our own parade around the neighborhood this morning. The music is triumphant—we call it the "triumphal" entry after all. The disciples thronging around him are jubilant, throwing down their cloaks on the road in front of him, a symbol of their respect and willingness to serve him.

But there is one person in this picture who is not happy or triumphant or even neutral. As the disciples shout their praise, Jesus looks out over the city and weeps, specifically because they haven't got a clue what it takes to bring peace, even to their city, let alone to the world. It's one thing to recognize that they are clueless on the day Jesus first calls Peter, James, and John away from their fishing nets to follow him. Totally expected.

But that was three years ago now. There have been miracles, transfigurations on mountaintops, and long days and nights of teaching, trying to tell them what it would take for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. He has lived with them and taught them this and explained it until he was blue in the face for three solid years. And the happy throng of disciples around him show that even his closest disciples don't get it.

They are so jubilant in this moment because they still think that Jesus is on a military and political mission. He's gone into Jerusalem before, but on foot. That he wants to ride into the city rather than walk as he typically did is a sign of that for them. Only kings ride into the city. And this is a descendant of David, the warrior king.

Remember way back in Advent we looked at this first-century period. It was less than 50 years before Jesus was born that Israel had lost its independence to Rome. They could still taste freedom and many were looking for the kind of messiah that Judas Maccabeus had been in the second century BCE—the savior who had led the successful revolt for Israel's independence.

Two of Jesus twelve disciples were named for that earlier savior, Judas. Another of the twelve we know as "Simon the Zealot." The Zealots were a revolutionary group that would make a strike forty years down the road that would cause Rome to crush Jerusalem like a bug, and the Temple with it. The Pax Romana had its limits. Jesus and his disciples share the same goal—freedom. But as the prophet Isaiah pointed out, God's ways are different than human ways, and it's that difference Jesus has been trying to teach them.

The message I hear in this combination of events—with the jubilation of the crowd interrupted by Jesus' tears—is "No, violence does not bring peace. Ever. A lack of fighting is not the same as peace. You can't force your way to peace."

He's been saying that to all who would listen—and many thousands listened. But those with ears did not truly hear. Jesus weeps not only because the city below him doesn't get it, but also because even those closest to him don't get it, and time is short. His disciples are, right at that very moment, hopping up and down with joy at the possibility that the revolt against Rome might begin within days. It won't.

And thus begins the triumphant, tear-soaked descent from the mountain. It's a physical descent from the Mount of Olives to the city of Jerusalem. But it's also the emotional descent of Jesus' disciples from the high of thinking they are heading toward national glory to the grim reality that they have failed to see, despite Jesus specifically warning them about it.

Peter even tried to squelch the warning, leading Jesus to say to him, "Get thou behind me, Satan!" War does not bring peace. Guns do not lead to fewer shootings. Conquering others does not make gardens grow, even if you enslave the population and force them to plant seeds. Violence of all kinds—physical, emotional, and spiritual—begets more of the same in a vicious spiral downwards into death of one kind or another.

What does make for peace? Jesus has been telling and teaching that way since the beginning of his public ministry, kicking it off with the Beatitudes at the start of his sermon on the mount in Matthew 5:3-12

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

For three years, Jesus has taught them that the way up is down. The first must be willing to become last; the greatest must become willing to become the least; those who lead must do so through service; and “greater love has no one than this, that you lay down your life for a friend.” But no one has heard—not even the innermost circle of his disciples.

Peter tells him to stop talking about suffering. James and John argue about which of them will be the greatest in God’s kingdom. And here they are cheering his march to death. It could have been different; but it’s not. He weeps both for what is and for what might have been.

It’s obvious now. Jesus will have to show them, first by wrapping a towel around his waist and spilling water on their feet after their last meal together, then by accepting a thorny crown on his head and spilling his blood the next day. The way to life is through death. Want to follow Jesus? Want to make a way for peace? Take. Up. Your. Cross. Not your sword, not your AR-15, not the flag of this nation or that; your cross. Then, and only then, will you wake up in a garden.

As I look around today, too many Christians are cheering when Jesus is weeping. Too many Christians are scrambling to go up when Jesus is leading us down. Too many seek power over others when Jesus says true power comes from serving the least of these. And too many look forward to Jesus’ second coming for the same reasons that the crowds cheered his entry into Jerusalem on that colt: They think it will spell the end for their enemies and glory for themselves.

As the prophet Amos said, “Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord!...Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Peace begins with justice, not vengeance.

If Jesus’ disciples could get it; in time, mourning could be turned to dancing, streams could flow in the desert, tears could become alleluias, and the dead could rise to new and everlasting life. Every year we join Jesus on the mountaintop and shout “Hosanna!” Jesus’ message hasn’t changed. Have we? Amen.