

The Clamor of Life

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Luke 19:28-40

Circle of Mercy, Palm Sunday: March 24, 2013

This is the one Sunday in the year when pastors have a rather stark choice to make about the spirit of the worship service. On the church calendar, today is either Palm Sunday, or Passion Sunday. The first involves a parade, waving palm branches, and shouts of joy rooted in hope. The other is a bleak remembrance of crucifixion, a solitary and painful tragedy that seemed to drown the world in hopelessness.

We will get to the cross on Friday, when we gather at Swan Mountain Farm for “The Last Words of Jesus,” a time of silence, prayer, and quiet music facilitated by Mark Siler. But tonight we remember that parade into Jerusalem, traditionally known as Jesus’ “triumphal entry.”

I give thanks particularly for the insights of theologians Walter Wink and Ched Myers, who have urged us to see that there’s a lot more going on here than meets the eye. Both have pointed out that this event was more absurdist street theater than ticker-tape parade. Had Jesus wanted to make a “triumphal entry,” fulfilling the hopes of the people for a powerful Messiah, he would have strapped on a sword, mounted a spirited steed, and charged through Jerusalem’s gates spouting promises of victory against the city’s oppressive Roman occupiers.

Not exactly the picture we have. Jesus would have been hard pressed to pick a more humble and absurd posture that day. Walter Wink, an insightful and courageous friend whom we lost not long ago, wrote in his groundbreaking book *Engaging the Powers*, “Consistent with all that he has said and done, Jesus enters Jerusalem farcically, on a donkey.”

And, let it be noted, the biblical accounts all make a point of saying that the animal on which Jesus rode was not just a donkey, but a colt—a young donkey, which, according to the gospel writers, was a beast that had never been ridden. So, in equestrian language, this young donkey was “unbroken,” a fact that must have only added to the absurdity of the situation. As we just heard, Luke wrote that his disciples had to “set Jesus upon it.” I can imagine that it may have taken all twelve of them to catch, calm, hold, and lead the frightened animal.

The symbols were rich that day for the people along the parade route. Jesus departed from the Mount of Olives, associated in the apocalyptic literature of the time with the final battle between the Jews and their enemies. The palm branches called to mind Simon Maccabaeus, a rebel general who, two centuries earlier, had entered Jerusalem to similar accolades and went on to liberate Palestine from Greek rule through his military prowess. The donkey brought echoes of the Hebrew prophet Zechariah, who spoke of a king foregoing chariots and horses for a humbler ride.

Ched Myers suggests that Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem functioned like a public liturgy, locating an act of worship in the public square. Through a dramatic parable, Jesus was telling the people that he was a different sort of Messiah. “The parade is filled with conflicting signals,” wrote Myers in *Binding the Strong Man*, his classic book on the Gospel of Mark, “as if it intends to be a satire on military liberators.”

Picture Greg Yost dressed as a Duke Energy executive at last fall’s Lake Julian protest of Big Coal, satirizing corporate greed—or Tim Nolan and friends on the streets of New York City, donning the orange jumpsuits of Guantanamo prisoners to make a point about torture. Imagine all the public places that people of conscience have transformed into sites of worship—from the White House and the Pentagon to the Rio Grande border; from Georgia’s Fort Benning to the Nevada Nuclear Test Site. Exposing truth, praying for peace.

On seeing Jesus, the people in the large crowd that had gathered for the annual Jewish festival of Passover shouted “Hosanna!” *Hosanna*—which for a long time I believed to be simply an exclamation of adoration and joy, like *hallelujah*—actually means in Hebrew, “Save us, we beseech you!” It was praise mixed with pleading. The people were expressing their longing for liberation and an end to their suffering.

I returned last Friday from three weeks in Detroit with my young friends Lydia and Erinn, whose son Isaac was born on March 10th. I’m extremely grateful to this Circle for extending me the grace of that visit. It was my first time witnessing a birth, and Isaac’s arrival in the world was a miracle amazing to behold.

There’s a lot that I could share about the experience of the birth and the days surrounding it. But I’ll spare you an adopted grandmother’s proud ramblings and offer just a few reflections that I think speak to our moment.

On Saturday, March 9th, the day before Isaac was born, Lydia’s dad, Bill, showed up with Middle Eastern take-out for lunch, and we all settled into the living room, enjoying the warmth of a fire while snow spilled out of the sky. Lydia pulled out the journal that her mom, Jeanie, had kept when she was birthing Lydia twenty-six years ago, and read sections of the beautiful words penned there. Jeanie died of brain cancer on New Year’s Eve of 2005, and the journal was her tangible presence with us.

Bill remembered aloud Jeanie’s high moans during the most intense stretches of her labor—and how he learned to moan along in decreasing harmonic intervals, lowering the pitch and intensity of Jeanie’s moans to calm her. Lucy, Lydia’s younger sister, had joined us for the weekend. Bill turned to her and told us that he had done exactly the same thing with her when she collapsed on her mother’s body and wailed inconsolably after she died. And then Lucy invited us all into the heavenly vision she had of Jeanie holding her grandson Isaac, getting ready to let him go and release him into Lydia and Erinn’s care.

Because Lydia’s labor lasted fifty-four hours, we spent a lot of stretches timing contractions. I couldn’t help thinking of my Mom’s passing from Alzheimer’s in February 2011. On her last night in the living room of the farmhouse at Swan Mountain Farm, my sisters Kay and Deb and I gathered around her bed, read a psalm and sang her a lullaby, as we had every evening since bringing her to the farm.

Before tucking her in for the night, we turned on the porch light beyond the window to soften the darkness, its glow falling on the two items that hung above her bed: her favorite painting of Jesus tenderly holding a lamb and her Do Not Resuscitate order. It was my turn to take the night shift. I wrote later: “I felt like a midwife, timing my mother’s breaths by my watch as expectant parents would time contractions, increasing the dosage and frequency of morphine through that long night drenched in moonlight.”

I did not end a day in Detroit without thinking of Ken Sehested, on extended leave from Circle of Mercy in South Dakota, tending to his sister and mother. We spoke of sleepless nights and supportive household chores in common. But in Detroit we awaited a birth, while he awaits a dying. And yet, neither event is clearly one or the other.

Someone once said that babies are God’s sign that life should go on. Isaac is a newborn life in a dying city, born to two women at the same moment that Michigan’s governor decided that Detroit is beyond hope and needs outside management. A banker, of course, was called in to do the job, his power trumping the mayor, and the city council, and the hopes of most of Detroit’s residents.

Lydia and Erinn and their friends have formed a community named after Lydia’s mother. They make their home on the same block in inner-city Detroit where Lydia grew up. The same doctor who delivered Lydia, who runs a clinic nearby, also caught Isaac. The neighborhood is filled with Mexican and Middle Eastern take-out shops, burnt-out storefronts, abandoned theaters and boarded-up pizzerias. The Vegas Strip Club and Tattoo Parlor stands next to a Latino church named “La Iglesia de Dios, Inc.” and across from a

pet store advertising “cages, straw, and body parts”—with a warning sign on the front door about removing all masks, sunglasses, hats, scarves, and gloves before entering.

Isaac’s community tends urban fruit trees, raises bees and chickens, offers safe haven to undocumented folks and pregnant teenagers. They bring glimpses of resurrection to a city that is being crucified by corporate greed and political power grabs. I suspect that Isaac may be the only kid around who will spend his first year sporting onesies that his mothers sewed out of old T-shirts bearing Martin Luther King quotes. He will grow up knowing the things that make for peace.

Our scripture passage for tonight ends at verse 40, with some of the Pharisees in the crowd telling Jesus to order his disciples to stop their loud praise of him, to hush their proclamations of “Peace and glory in the highest heaven!” Jesus answers them, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” The next sentence reads, “As he came near and saw the city, [Jesus] wept over it, saying, ‘If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!’”

This is quite a week for remembering the things that make for peace. We mark the tenth anniversary of the murder of Rachel Corrie, a young American activist who was run over by an Israeli bulldozer while she was trying to stop the destruction of a Palestinian family’s home. We also recognize the tenth anniversary of the launch of the Iraq War—now declared officially over, but unending for the families of the estimated 100,000 Iraqis killed and the children suffering from the depleted uranium left by our weapons; for the loved ones of the 5,000 U.S. soldiers who lost their lives and the many more who have been maimed physically and spiritually.

On Wednesday we lost Gordon Cosby, a humble, ninety-five-year-old saint who launched Church of the Saviour in Washington, D.C., in 1946. On Friday concerned Ashevilleians marched to TD Bank, in an effort to stop support for the Keystone XL pipeline. Today a Holy Week fast begins in solidarity with prisoners at Guantanamo, on a hunger strike to bring attention to their plight of isolation, abuse, and incarceration without trial. Last week the state of Maryland repealed the death penalty, and next week our friend Wiley Dobbs will spend his forty-first Easter on death row. All these remind us of the power of death in the world—and give us glimpses of the things that make for peace.

This week, more than any other perhaps, we understand the mingling of life and death. We move through a swirl of emotions—from tonight’s adoring parade, through Thursday’s betrayal and Friday’s agony of the cross, to the miraculous joy of resurrection that overtakes us on Sunday morning.

But the parade and the cross are not as separate as I thought on first glance. By choosing to enter Jerusalem as he did, Jesus was acknowledging the limits of his power in the eyes of the world. As the donkey carried him into the city, he was choosing the humility, submission, and nonviolence that would carry him to the cross.

“Lent is a call to celebrate our redemption in that difficult complex of cross and victory,” preached Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, a bold and tireless advocate for the poor at a time when his country was engulfed in repressive violence. At just about this hour thirty-three years ago, during a five o’clock memorial Mass in a hospital chapel, Romero was delivering his last homily. It was based on words recorded in the twelfth chapter of the Gospel of John, which Jesus offered to his disciples just after his so-called “triumphal entry” into Jerusalem: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Romero preached, “Those who surrender to the service of people through the love of Christ will live like the grain of wheat that dies, [bringing] the harvest...I implore all of you, beloved brothers and sisters, to see a better world...to have hope, joined with a spirit of surrender and sacrifice. We must do what we can. All of us can do something.”

Romero then raised the bread and the cup, proclaiming, “This body broken and this blood shed for human beings encourage us to give our body and blood up to suffering and pain, as Christ did—not for self, but to bring justice and peace to our people—” At that moment, a shot rang out, and the archbishop’s blood was spilled, mingling with the blood of Jesus, the savior: “*El Salvador.*”

Before he died, Romero had prophetically proclaimed, “I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will rise again in the people of El Salvador.” And—with thanks to Bill Ramsey, who shared this quote—Romero wrote in his diary near the end of his life: “This people’s cry for liberation is a clamor that goes up to God that nothing and no one can stop...”

“I tell you,” said Jesus to the Pharisees, “if the people were silent, the stones would shout out.” Whatever we do on behalf of life is not in vain. No matter how absurd our efforts for peace may seem, no matter how powerless we may feel, all of creation joins us in this song of liberating hope. Even the stones cry out and join the chorus.

It is true that, even in “triumphal entry,” we can see glimpses of death amid life. And even in crucifixion lie buried the seeds of life. This is the mystery of our faith.

The challenge for us, I believe, is to live neither in denial of the power of death nor by giving it the last word. Jesus still weeps over our dying cities, our ravaged earth, and our blindness to the things that make for peace. As the beloved, martyred archbishop of El Salvador exhorts, we must do what we can. All of us can do something. And this most holy of weeks reminds us that the story is far from over.

Amen.