

Palm Sunday C  
Luke 19:28-40  
April 13, 2025

*And Silent Stones*  
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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.'*

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A man bought a donkey from a preacher. The preacher told the man that this donkey had been trained in a very unique way (being the donkey of a preacher). The only way to make the donkey go was to say, 'Hallelujah!' The only way to make the donkey stop was to say, 'Amen!' The man was pleased with his purchase and immediately got on the animal to try out the preacher's instructions. 'Hallelujah!' shouted the man. The donkey

began to trot. 'Amen!' shouted the man. The donkey stopped immediately. 'This is great!' said the man. With a 'Hallelujah' he rode off, very proud of his new purchase. The man traveled for a long time through the mountains. As he headed towards a cliff, he tried to remember the word to make the donkey stop. 'Stop,' said the man. 'Halt!' he cried. The donkey just kept going. 'Oh no...' 'Bible...Church!...Please! Stop!!' shouted the man. The donkey just began to trot faster. He was getting closer and closer to the edge of the cliff. Finally, in desperation, the man said a prayer: 'Please, dear Lord. Please make this donkey stop before I go off the end of this mountain. In Jesus' name, AMEN.' The donkey came to an abrupt stop just one step from the edge of the cliff. 'HALLELUJAH!' shouted the man.<sup>1</sup>

I know, I saw the eyerolls. It was pretty bad. But I had to tell you a story about a donkey on Palm Sunday to distract you from what was missing in the text. Did anyone catch it? If you did, don't be shy. Raise those hands and be proud! Well, Jesus was definitely there, and the disciples, and the donkey, and people, and coats in the road...but no palms. There are no palms in our text for Palm Sunday. Coincidentally, there are also no shouts of 'Hosanna!' Branches and hosannas are common to all three other versions of this story in the Bible. We know that Mark was written first and the authors of both Matthew and Luke used Mark's gospel to write their own. John didn't use Matthew, Mark, or Luke but didn't miss this detail. For some reason, Luke intentionally left out the palm branches. Are you curious why? If your answer is 'no,' then I'll apologize now for the remainder of the sermon. I won't be offended if you color one of the pictures from a kids' pack.

For the rest, we'll go back to about 140 years before Jesus' birth. His homeland was embroiled in conflict with invading empires over control. The Hasmoneans emerged and led the Maccabean Revolt that established

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<sup>1</sup> Thugilex. "Preacher's Donkey," Neowin.net, June 26, 2008: <https://www.neowin.net/forum/topic/645614-jokepreachers-donkey/>.

an independent Judahite kingdom once again. The Hasmoneans adopted the palm branch as a symbol of victory. For a hundred years they ruled in Judea, but eventually internal fighting led to Roman intervention and the establishment of Judea as a protectorate of the empire, replete with Roman administration, peacekeeping troops, and a governor whose business was to regulate trade and maximize tax revenues. The ancient kingdom of the Judahites would never again be free, but the memory of that freedom lived on. A spark of hope for a new and free Judea and the reestablishment of the ancient royal line of King David continued to burn. And the symbolic meaning of palm branches was never forgotten – victory.

But Luke didn't just leave out the palm branches, did he? He left out the hosannas too. Hosanna is an Aramaic word based on the Hebrew word *hoshana* which means "Save, we pray." The hosannas on that Palm Sunday were a cry for deliverance to one they were calling king. When the Pharisees begged Jesus to silence to crowd, they weren't being killjoys. They were trying to prevent the full might of Rome from coming down on them all for causing unrest in a region that was notorious for unrest, especially during Passover when the people celebrated their freedom from the oppression they faced in Egypt.

Luke's omission of both palms and hosannas was no accident. It's almost as if Luke had known what so many people today believe to be gospel truth: that politics and religion shouldn't mix! Both the palms and the hosannas were political symbols of resistance and, ultimately, victory. The crowds were throwing around the word 'king' in reference to Jesus at a time when Roman presence in Jerusalem was already on edge. In just a few days, Jesus would be crucified for inciting an insurrection. Luke knew that the charge would read "King of the Jews" so there was no point scrubbing that reference. But the author was writing to a non-Jewish audience and wanted to convince them that Jesus was for them too. The Triumphal Entry needed to look less like a political statement in order to

appeal. And that's why there are no palms and no hosannas in Luke's version of the story.

If we're honest, Christians have been doing the same thing for a very long time. Christians tend to smooth off the rough edges of Jesus' message to make it more palatable to a broader audience. Christians often boil the faith down to love, but avoid talk of sacrifice; talk about Heaven, but let folks off the hook for building it here on earth; recite the Beatitudes without confronting Empire; claim a personal relationship with Jesus without fostering relationships with folks on the margins, as he taught; do our best to keep politics out of the church, when much of what Jesus taught was very political. It's a thin line to walk, but, like Luke, we want the message to appeal. But there's a risk there too, of losing the prophetic edge, the radical inclusion, the uncompromising justice, the tough love, the prudence of simplicity, and the timeliness of proclamation that made Jesus special.

There's no question that Jesus understood the wisdom of choosing one's battles carefully – of knowing when to go “all in.” And when not to. I think that's what Luke was doing here, too. That's still what the church has to do all these centuries later. We walk the thin line. May God give us wisdom to walk the line with integrity, to know when to stand back, and to know when to go all in. May it be so. Amen.