



**“Countering Darkness with Light”**  
**Scripture – Luke 19:28-40**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, April 14, 2019**

The popular notion of the Palm Sunday processional is that it had the flavor of the Rose Bowl Parade or Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. No helium-filled cartoon characters drifting overhead; no immaculate flower-covered floats motoring down the road, but many have the impression it was a party atmosphere, like Charlottesville after ending March Madness by winning the national championship.

Growing up in the church, I was led to believe that when Jesus entered Jerusalem it was an innocent celebration of his followers who were excited to see their wise teacher and miracle worker enter the Holy City. No one bothered to explain the serious political overtones of the procession. Today’s text is a prime example of how the point of a passage can be lost when plucked from its original context. Understanding the historical situation when Jesus entered Jerusalem is critical for grasping the meaning of the passage.

Only a handful of stories appear in all four gospels. Case in point: the birth of Jesus only makes the cut in Matthew and Luke. However, Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem at the onset of the final week of his life is in all four gospels and the narratives are very similar. Matthew, Mark, and John, report that the crowds shout “Hosanna!” which does not mean “Hooray!” or “Right on!” or “You rock!” It is neither a shout of encouragement nor a cheer of admiration. It is a plea – a desperate plea – that means “save us” or “deliver us.” Were the people shouting, “Save us from *sin*?” Doubtful.

Our Scripture reading reminds us that Jesus carefully calculated his entry to take place a handful of days before the Passover Feast when pilgrims swelled the city’s population to five times its normal size. Jesus selected this precise moment because it was the religious festival when Jews celebrated God liberating them from slavery in Egypt centuries earlier. Now that they lived under the harsh Roman military occupation, they dreamt of liberation. The people longed for the Messiah to drive out the Romans, to dethrone Caesar and to become a new king for the Jewish people.

To keep the lid on such national aspirations, Pilate and his regiment of armed soldiers waving banners of the empire, entered the city from the west. Jesus and his followers waving palms branches entered from the east. Pilate came to make sure the talk of freedom from oppression did not get out of hand and ignite an uprising. Jesus came to liberate the people.

Why the waving of Palm branches? Going back to at least the time of the Maccabees, they “were a symbol of national triumph and victory.”<sup>1</sup>

The Palm Sunday processional was not in the category of a holiday parade. It was akin to the Women's March or the Civil Rights March or the *Tiananmen Square* protest. It was not a light-hearted festival, it was a resistance movement.

Protest marches often have memorable slogans. The Civil Rights movement will be remembered for "We shall overcome" and "Power to the People" and "I have a dream."

The slogans used by the followers of Jesus were "Save us" and "Son of David" and "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." Each of these announced their allegiance not to Caesar, but to Jesus; not to the illegitimate emperor, but their true king; not to Rome, but to the Kingdom of God. It was a dangerous display of opposition to the emperor.

This is why the Pharisees rush to Jesus and say, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop!" They fear what will happen if Pilate is provoked. The Romans would relish an opportunity to set an example of wrath that would descend if they incited a crowd with talk of revolution. The way of the oppressor is to suffocate all resistance; but people will forfeit their lives for justice and freedom. You only have to look to the American Revolution to know this is true.

Reflecting on this intense moment, Howard Thurman pondered what thoughts might be racing through the mind of Jesus as he sauntered into the city on the back of a donkey. Was he thinking of his mother – how deeply he loved her and how much he missed her? Was he wishing he had never had this great burden laid upon him to speak the truth?

I suspect a good many thoughts raced through his mind as his followers were cheering him on and pledging their allegiance. Surely he reflected on his inaugural sermon in his hometown synagogue when he claimed the prophet Isaiah's words as his mission statement: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free."

Riding a humble donkey onto the home court of the oppressors, Jesus disclosed to his followers the pattern of God's kingdom. It includes resisting muscle with nonviolent protest, facing danger with courage, and being prepared to risk one's well-being for the benefit of others.

Do you know the story of Le Chambon? "Through an extraordinary campaign of nonviolent resistance during World War II, the residents of this small French village saved thousands of Jews from deportation and almost certain death... The main driving force behind their resistance effort was its spiritual leader, Pastor André Trocmé, and his wife, Magda. They rallied the members of their Protestant congregation, and others in their community, in a bold plan to hide Jewish refugees in their attics, barns, hotels and cellars throughout their village"<sup>2</sup> and help them escape into Switzerland. They placed their own lives at risk by defying the Nazis and the collaborating Vichy government that were determined to round up Jews and send them to death camps.

"Not a soul in the village gave the secret away, despite the risks: the punishment for helping Jews to escape was deportation or death. In fact, the pastor's cousin, who was part of this resistance, was arrested and deported to Majdanek concentration camp in 1943 where he was executed."<sup>3</sup>

Pastor Trocmé stiffened the resolve of his congregation by telling a series of stories about donkeys based on well-known passages in the New Testament: Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem on a donkey, their escape to Egypt on a donkey, the Good Samaritan placing the injured man on his donkey, and today's passage of Jesus entering Jerusalem. In each story the pastor created a scenario in which "the owner of the donkey hesitated to allow his animal to be used by these people for their various journeys, but the donkey, in its strength and determination,

refused to bow to its master's fear. The preacher's point was obvious. The members of his congregation were living in a time and place in history where fear dominated and their faith called them to exhibit courage."<sup>4</sup>

Today's story is about Jesus leaving the safe confines of Bethany and entering the hostile city of Jerusalem; but it's about more than that. Today's story is about Jesus' loyal followers escorting him into the Holy City; but it's about more than that. Today's story is about Jesus demonstrating courage in the face of overwhelming odds; but it's about more than that. It is a blueprint of how we are to counter darkness with light.

Question marks bubble up to query your sanity.  
Are you cocksure of the craggy path you trek?  
Have you run the risk assessment of the peril you summon?

Doubts joust with your fortitude to perforate your tenacity,  
misgivings multiply to whittle away your intrepid spirit,  
and hesitation jockeys to seize control of your command center.

Will you surrender to unease  
consoling your conscience that this is not your procession to pilot?  
Will you mask your dread  
constructing a façade that oozes counterfeit?

Or will this be the moment you shed your skin of vacillation?  
Will this be the time you beckon your valor?  
Is this the hour for which you were created?

#### NOTES

1. Walter J. Harrelson, General Editor, *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), p. 1933.
2. Anita Isalska, "A French Village Committed to Deception, [BBC.com/travel](http://BBC.com/travel), August 7, 2018.
3. Ibid.
4. Janet Hunt, "The Donkey: A Subversive Choice?" *dancingwiththeword.com*, March 13, 2016.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson**

Holy God,

Today we mark your Son's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. With shouts of "Hosanna," we join our voices with the crowds of long ago that welcomed him. We join them in singing praise to the king who comes in the name of the Lord. For Christ proclaims release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; he gives hope to the hopeless, heals the sick, and binds up the brokenhearted.

And yet we know the shouts of praise will fade away. By the end of the week, the same crowds who shouted, "Hosanna," will shout, "Crucify!" Our hearts break with these shouts, and with the pain and suffering that follow them. Help us, Eternal God, to make this journey with Jesus: from the streets of Jerusalem, to the upper room, to the garden, to the cross, and – ultimately – to the empty tomb. It is on this journey that we remember that you have suffered the depths of human pain, that you are present with us.

This, O God, is our hope ... During the days or weeks or months when we are lost in shadow and cannot see the light of Eastern morn, we take comfort knowing you are with us in all things. So we lay before you the pain and suffering of our lives, knowing it is *never* too much for you to bear. We pray for those imprisoned by addiction

or illness; those weighed down by loneliness or grief; those who know the pangs of hunger or who live in lands torn apart by violence. Breathe your Spirit of peace upon them, and draw them into your embrace.

Lord – enter our lives once again this day. Heal us, transform us, renew us. Draw us closer to you in this journey of Holy Week, empower us with strength and courage and with the assurance that you are with us in all things.

We pray in the name of Jesus our Savior, who taught us to pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**