

The March of the Kingdoms

Luke 19:28-40

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April 14, 2019

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."
(Luke 19:28-40, NRSV)*

With a high school band or soldiers in basic training, one of the first things taught is how to march. And that's not an easy task. Learning how to march takes practice, hours and hours of practice. Hours and hours spent paying attention to even the slightest details. The length of the stride. The pace of the walk. The swing of the arm, the lift of the knee, the posture of the back. It takes hard, hard work to notice and to correct any minute deviation from complete uniformity, and it gets more difficult as the group gets larger.

Marching takes obedience. It takes discipline. It takes a willingness to give up your individual style of walking so that only the group is noticed. In fact, that's the very reason why people march. A march intends to communicate something important about the marchers and who they represent. A march doesn't happen by accident.

Each year, on the Sunday before Easter, we remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of Passover week. But maybe you didn't know that there was actually another march, another entry into Jerusalem, that also occurred around the same time as the one we celebrate today. Jesus, his disciples and those with them, came from the east. This other march

came from the west. And this march looked different, it felt different, and I guess that shouldn't be surprising, for this second march was intended to communicate a completely different message.

Passover was a stick of dynamite in those days, just waiting for a charge. This was a time when the Jewish people came from all over to Jerusalem to remember God's deliverance from the oppressive Egyptian empire. They remembered that Yahweh's mighty hand shook them loose from Pharaoh's grip and led them through the water to free them from Egypt, and they, the descendants of slaves, gave thanks to the God who purchased their freedom, who called them his own people.

In Jesus' day, they remembered all of these things . . . at a time when they themselves were ruled by the oppressive Roman Empire. In the years both before and after Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, there were deadly riots in Jerusalem right at the time of Passover. It's not a hard jump to go from remembering freedom from Egypt to demanding freedom from Rome.

So, at Passover, Pontius Pilate did as the governors before him. He ordered Roman troops to Jerusalem, to reinforce the troops already there. These troops marched from the west, from the city of Caesarea.

This was a march that was meant to display Roman rule, Roman power, Roman discipline. A march with a message that was much more than simply a desire to keep the peace. This march was headed for the temple, for these reinforcements were stationed smack dab in the center of Jewish worship and life. That's not exactly a subtle message, is it?

From the west came that march to Jerusalem. In my mind's eye, I see glistening silver reflected in the sun. I see muscled horses, dressed with colorful blankets. I see armored soldiers carrying polished and sharpened swords. I imagine a slow, deliberate procession, a show of force that said, "Come worship your God at Passover, but don't forget whose mighty hand occupies your temple now." They were trained, and they were ready. From the west, they marched.

But from the east, Jesus also made preparations to enter Jerusalem. From the east, our scripture tells us this morning, Jesus set the stage for the culmination of his ministry.

Jesus deliberately, intentionally, set his face toward Jerusalem and began his march. And from the very beginning, he made it clear that HIS march would not be a show of force and coercive power but what it means to walk completely in step with God, a show of submission and service to God, a unity of humility, conviction and steadfast love. Jesus spent the bulk of his ministry training his disciples to walk with him in the way that he walked.

When the time came, Jesus carefully prepared for his arrival into Jerusalem so that his entry and his message would be in complete agreement. His choice to ride on a colt fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah, found in Zechariah 9:9:

9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! 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.

But the prophecy doesn't end there. The prophecy continues:

10 He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

We know that the disciples weren't completely aware of what would happen in Jerusalem. But they didn't miss the symbolism. As they marched with Jesus, they shouted:

"Blessed is the king that comes in the name of the Lord!

Those words come from Psalm 118, and the use of this psalm is significant, because this psalm was used in Jewish worship to celebrate the fulfillment of God's plan. The one greeted as coming in the Lord's name would be the Messiah, and it was happening before their eyes. Even if they didn't have a full grasp of what that would mean – they referenced a king though the psalm does not -- those disciples cried out for joy and peace. That was their expectation.

So do you get the picture?

From the west, the Roman soldiers marched, displaying the peak of human power, representing Caesar himself, and ready to take up their quarters in the temple during the Passover. From the east, these disciples marched, surrounding the humble servant king, shouting with joy and proclaiming God's peace.

From the east and from the west, these groups made their way to Jerusalem, the marches of two colliding kingdoms, one a humble display of peace, the other a powerful show of force.

Yes, next week is Easter. But this week, we remember what happens when the two marches meet. The question is, which march are you on?

Marching takes obedience. It takes discipline. It takes a willingness to give up your individual style of walking so that only the group is noticed.

The thing is, we all have been carefully prepared to walk in step with the beat of this world. In fact, that's the march we are a part of if we don't intentionally choose another one. We've been conditioned for this march, so much that we don't even notice it.

Jesus, though, made it clear that HIS march would not be a show of force and coercive power but what it means to walk completely in step with God, a show of submission and service to

God, a unity of humility, conviction and steadfast love. And because Jesus has gone before us, because God has blessed us with the gift of the Spirit, because we are not alone but a part of a people who call themselves Christians, we are able to slowly but surely keep time with the steps of Jesus.

And how are you learning to walk in step?