

Text: Luke 19: 28-40
Title: Caravan
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If you go to Jerusalem you can walk the traditional route of the Palm Sunday parade. With a guide, some palm fronds, and maybe a rental donkey, you can do it for less than hundred dollars. You start on the Mount of Olives, go down a steep hill, cross a short valley, and enter into Jerusalem through the Lion's Gate. The walk is just over a half mile ~ barely long enough for a parade. It misses where most of the Jews lived and the typical route they would have traversed to the temple, but it fits the traditional narrative and there's a thriving business in reenacting the palm parade.

Well... Let me offer an alternative.

Let me offer a route that makes sense to some historians, archeologists, and theologians. Let me pick up and expand on an idea that I suggested last year....

Jerusalem is literally a city set on a hill. A temperate high point in central Israel, it rises up from rolling hills that fall away into rocky valleys and barren deserts. The temple was situated at the pinnacle of the city ~ most of the city gradually falls away from there.

Maps or models of first century Jerusalem show what looks like a ghetto on the southside. The housing was dense, the pitch was steep, and the living was difficult. The gate into the city at the south end is the Dung Gate.

Waste (which flows downhill) flowed out through that part of town. And garbage was hauled out of that gate to be burned in the surrounding valley. The southside was smelly, toxic, and unsanitary. And, in the grand tradition of environmental injustice, the squalid south end was where the poor folks lived. The south end was where most of the Hebrews lived.

Jews from all over Israel traveled to Jerusalem for Passover.

From the West Bank, the verdant hills of Galilee, and the fishing villages along the Mediterranean, they made pilgrimage to Jerusalem to observe the defining story of their faith. They were God's people, chosen in Abraham, but led out of Egyptian captivity and into the freedom of the Promised Land by Moses. And, from all over Israel they gathered to retell and remember who they were.

Passover was a religious observance but it was also a family reunion.

During Passover the suburbs, the southside, and the surrounding hills would have overflowed with extended Jewish families. Aunts and uncles, mothers-in-law, grandparents, third cousins, neighbor and kinfolk would travel together and bunk together in the great joy of celebrating their identity.

However, bubbling just below the surface was the restless rage of being refugees in their own country. Living under the thumb of the Romans, they didn't control their own land or economic

destiny. They saw the great disparity between their meager existence and the wealth and power of the Empire. There was as shady relationship between the wealthy elites and the governing authorities that kept them locked out. They knew a deep longing for the coming of a day when they would flourish in the land God had promised. And, they had a treasure trove of religious resources that gave voice to that day when God would (again) upend the oppressor, liberate the captives, and inaugurate the Kingdom of God.

So, Jesus approached Jerusalem with a caravan of Hebrews who are desperate for a better life. And as they traveled word spread of one of their own, a son of David, who was a gifted teacher and healer. Stories were told of miracles. There were reports that in Bethany he had even raised Lazarus from the dead....

And as Jesus crested the Mount of Olives, on the young donkey that his disciples had rustled up, crowds began to gather. He descended into the valley surrounding Jerusalem. You could hear the buzz in the air. This was the rabbi who had driven out demons and healed the sick. This was the one who claimed the promise of Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And let's just imagine that Jesus followed the valley south to the Dung Gate and turned into Jerusalem....

The streets were teeming with his people. This was their neighborhood. Some heard the hubbub and came out of their houses. They joined those walking along with Jesus and his disciples; soon they were singing old songs of hope and chanting lyrics of liberation. Maybe this was the day!

Didn't it say in Zechariah?

Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations, his rule will extend from sea to sea...

And as they climbed the street up toward the steps that led into the temple courts, people ran ahead of Jesus to lay down their cloaks on the mucky rutted roads. (There are no palms in Luke's gospel....) They pinned their hopes on his back and paved the way with their coats. Surly a king wouldn't sully himself with the stink of these streets.

Maybe this was the moment.

Maybe this was the movement.

Maybe there was enough momentum.

Maybe this was the messiah!

Dear friends, the route I traced may not be the route that Jesus followed, and if the short route through the Lion's Gate works better for you ~ so be it. But don't for a minute imagine that the gathering crowds resembled middle-class America. My guess is that the caravan was an unruly-mangy-lot of the poor and the marginalized,
the refugee and the ruffian,
the disenfranchised and the desperate.

Rather than the sunny sanitized parades of children's storybook Bibles, or the spiritual tourism of contemporary Jerusalem, I'd offer that Jesus begins the last week of his life at the base of that south side hill, in the Hebrew slums, and from there he stirs up a stink storm in the temple courts that sets in motion the events that lead to his crucifixion on Friday.

(Long dramatic pause....)

The series of laments that were part of our liturgy during Lent were an effort at giving voice to the stories and burdens that we carry. Scripture is full of honest cries to God; we wanted to share in that tradition. Therefore....

Liz Hulford spoke of the grief in the death of a loved one;
Clay Carlson cried out about the destruction of the environment;
Nate Pettinga wrote about the decline of Alzheimer's or dementia;
Jim Kwastenet reflected on living with long term incurable health issues;
and Jim Hofman gave voice to the struggles of alcoholism and addictions.

We've been blessed by these honest courageous laments. Thanks be to God. But they are only emblematic, they just scratch the surface, of the stories and burdens that we carry.

I was asked recently about the wisdom of including a lament in this morning's service. Shouldn't Palm Sunday be joyful and triumphant ~ led by the beautiful voices of children and the pageantry of rhythmically-challenged-Reformed-folks sheepishly waving greenery? Shouldn't Palm Sunday be a sort of Easter-lite, a foretaste of the glory of Easter morning?

There may be some wisdom there. Lord knows that we can use all the joy and hope that we can muster. But, I think an honest look at the journey of Jesus into Jerusalem calls for an honest recounting of the laments that we carry.

So, this morning, metaphorically speaking, rather than simply waving palm fronds what if we also laid our coats on the mucky-rutted-road that Jesus rode into Jerusalem? And what if our coats are the laments that we carry? Rather than Palm Sunday as an appetizer for Easter can we lay our stories and our laments at the feet of Jesus?

The crowds in Jerusalem had no way of knowing what the next days would hold. They only knew what they carried in their hearts and they cast their coats on the road in front of Jesus. They laid their hopes and deepest longings at his feet.

May we do the same. May we prepare the way by offering the cries of our hearts and laying down the burdens that we carry.

Too pick up our preaching path through Lent....

Even as those who traverse a wilderness, we are gathered unto God as a mother hen gathers her chicks. And under that embrace let us tell the truth of who we are, using the time that we have to bring our whole selves to the hope of Easter morn. And no matter our story, no matter the truth we tell, God the Father runs towards us and all is forgiven. Therefore, in the light of this joyful mystery let us pour out our gratitude in extravagance. And let us find our place in the caravan. Let us lay our laments at the feet of Jesus as he makes his way toward the cross.

Whether you are barely hanging on or comfortably confident,
black or white, male or female, gay or straight, progressive or conservative,
criminal or choirboy, broke or just broken....

From the cancer ward or the mourner's bench, riddled with doubts or full
of faith, cynical or pure of heart, naïve or jaded, no matter your limp or
your lament, come and join the caravan. For....

*Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!*

Even so, come Lord Jesus.
Amen.