

Peace in Heaven

Luke 19:28-40

Northminster Presbyterian Church

Rev. Michael D. Kirby

April 9, 2017

Palm/Passion Sunday

So here we stand with our palms in hand, ready to proclaim Jesus King as he comes into Jerusalem, ready to rejoice at the might and power of our Lord, trying not to look to the end of the week or even the end of this service — where the soldiers are preparing for a different kind of parade. Here we stand ready for our palm-waving, King-declaring parade, warming up our Andrew Lloyd Webber, “Hosana Heysana, sana, sana hey!”

And it’s Luke, so we are ready for some great singing, right? I mean, after all, this is the guy who remembered how it was 33 years ago on that starlit night when another choir appeared and sang Psalm 118. And then sang on, proclaiming, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and Peace on Earth; Goodwill to Humankind!”

So with that prelude, the choir is placed at the end of the parade and they are singing loud and strong. But, wait. They have the words wrong — no hosannas! And surprise, they sing Psalm 118 too. But then they let fly, “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!”

The heavenly choir’s announcement of peace on earth has become the ragtag disciples’ chorus of “peace in heaven.” Even in the midst of Jesus’ triumphant entry, we are reminded that things have changed, that Jesus’ life and ministry are coming to a close in a way that, at least for now, doesn’t promise peace on earth, but declares heaven’s peace. In the center of the Roman Occupation, at the start of a Passover celebration that will surely come with Roman displays of might and power to keep the people in their place, perhaps peace on earth catches in their throats.

We can relate, right? How can we sing of peace on earth when bodies of babies are held in the arms of a grieving father and widower—his wife and children taken from him by chemical weapons that have been banned in wartime for 100 years? How can we proclaim a reign of peace when even now, we don’t next know when our bombs will fall in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria in efforts to confront evil and inhuman acts, but where too often, our good intentions have spilled innocent

blood? How can we talk of peace on a day when a bomb ripped through a Palm Sunday service at a Coptic Christian church in Egypt this morning killing many, and wounding many more? How can today be a celebration of earthly peace when just days ago we had to confront the 49th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the midst of a nation where people of color still must confront prejudice and institutional racism every day? Maybe peace on earth catches in our throats too.

But just what does peace in heaven look like? How on earth can we know? With all due respect to the varied reports of out-of-body experiences, who among us can really know what peace in heaven looks like?

But what a minute. Isn't He the Prince of Peace? At the time Jesus is riding the innocent baby donkey into Jerusalem, the people know what peace on earth looks like, or at least what it is supposed to look like, according to the powers that be. Peace on earth is the Pax Romana, the peace in their city maintained by the occupying forces. And perhaps Luke wants us to know that at least right now, at least in this triumphal entry procession, the choir gets it. Jesus isn't riding into town on a sturdy steed with iron armor, swords or spears in hand. He's on a "colt that has never been ridden," an animal proper for sacrifice, a fulfillment of the prophecy back in the 9th chapter of Zechariah. "O Daughter Jerusalem, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey..." He's the most unlikely king of all and perhaps that's the point, for this king is not proclaiming an earthly peace obtained with defensive retaliatory strikes or maintained through blockades and no-fly zones. No, the peace proclaimed here — the peace of heaven this king brings — has to be something different.

Maybe we are supposed to remember the king from Jesus' last parable, the one that comes shortly before today's text. The Parable of the Pounds is twice as long as today's text. In it, Jesus speaks of a king who gives bags of money to some servants before leaving town, and when he comes back, he rewards the ones who have used the funds productively and chastises those who hoarded the money, or who were afraid to use it. What if, in this parable, Jesus, knowing he is about to enter Jerusalem, knowing some will call him king, wants to make it very clear that he is not merely a king who would conquer Rome, or provide worldly peace — the absence of violence and war — but instead something more active, something that is transforming the world, something that he is inviting others to join in on, acknowledging that there is work to be done; there are bold commitments to be made.

It is ironic that Palm Sunday falls on this day, April 9th, with the disciple's choir suggesting this active peace — this costly peace that is heaven's peace — is to be declared. For today is the 72nd anniversary of the hanging of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the pastor-theologian who was connected to an effort to assassinate Hitler — though he was not an active participant in planning violence — and whose most famous book is called "The Cost of Discipleship." For Bonhoeffer, God's grace, the source of all heavenly peace, was freely given, but not cheap. It calls us into lives dedicated to proclaiming in our actions and our words, the gracing love of God that transforms the world.

Yes, when we hear the people sing to Jesus, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord," it's almost as if Luke expects us to say, "Hold on, wait a minute. Jesus is king. But Jesus just said if he is my king, then I have work to do. I have talents to use, commitments to make." What if heavenly peace is achieved not in the absence of conflict, but in the creation of community? Bonhoeffer reminds us that community need not be perfect, but it is shaped by the perfecting grace of God.

And perhaps that reminds us of what we talked about last year on Palm Sunday — those cloaks, the cloaks that typically define who has money and who doesn't, the cloaks that are the ancient symbol of privilege and wealth. Luke trades the palms of military victory and earthly peace for people surrendering their privilege, laying down the things that divide them socially, using that privilege literally to prepare the way of the one who brings the peace of heaven to earth.

What a jumble this choir's song has made of this festival day — these crazy carols that speak not of earthy peace but of a heavenly peace; this silly colt that's never been to war, that shows no signs of victory in his uneasy gait. these trampled cloaks that leave us not knowing who is in and who is out, forced to treat everyone as if they matter in this new community being proclaimed; and, finally this idea that, while there is joy in the deliverance promised by the reign of Christ, there also are claims upon on our lives that can be costly.

Shane Claiborne understands this, I think. Shane is a leader in what some are calling the New Monasticism. He is one of the founders of the Simple Way, an intentional community in North Philadelphia that grew out of a college protest movement. Shane studied at Wheaton College here in Chicagoland, among other places, before choosing a life as a peace-making disciple of Jesus.

As he recounts in his book, *The Irresistible Revolution*, at one point before he had really found the way forward, he and those he was living with learned of a group of homeless people in North Philly who had been chased away from their shanty

town under the interstate and then taken up residence in an abandoned Catholic church. When they found out the people were living there, the Archdiocese gave them two days to move out. And when officials arrived to deliver that order, they found a sign plastered over the front of the church: “How can we worship a homeless man on Sunday and ignore one on Monday?”

Claiborne called together a group of college students and others who were seeking something similar to what he was looking to do — mostly white middle class kids — and they moved in with the homeless folks in the church. And they organized the city to get behind them. They rallied and generated a lot of attention for the plight of the homeless in Philadelphia. They changed the community conversation so strongly that in the middle of the night, hours before the Archdiocese was sending the fire marshal to close the building, a group of firefighters arrived with donated smoke detectors and extinguishers so they could pass the inspection they didn’t even know was coming. What was supposed to be two days became two years, by which time new programs and housing became available for most of the homeless folks staying in the church. The peace of heaven came to Philadelphia; at least a glimpse of it was there.

This week, we heard once again that word that sounds so clinical, but which means so much — regime change. It is what many are calling for in response to the Sarin gas attack in Syria this week that killed and maimed so many, so cruelly. It’s what we sought to accomplish in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. It’s such a clinical name for war.

There is a regime change being announced on this day too: the Peace in Heaven is breaking in now, that peace that death cannot conquer, that peace that stands up to the violence of this world in a way that defies our earthly understandings of power and logic. It has a ways to go this week, before its true power can be demonstrated. But, nevertheless, it invites us to step into the road perhaps in time to take up our crosses and join this new ruler, this Prince of Peace, to proclaim the Peace of Heaven — even here, even now. Amen.