

The Pilgrimage

Luke 19:28-40

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 25, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

²⁸After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

²⁹When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰saying, "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. ³¹If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" ³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?"

³⁴They said, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷As 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, ³⁸saying,

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

³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." ⁴⁰He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." (Luke 19:28-40, NRSV)

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The King of Rock and Roll died August 16, 1977. I actually remember the day. Elvis Presley was 42 years old. Ever since, April 16th has marked the date when thousands of fans from all around the world make a pilgrimage to Graceland, Elvis' former home in Memphis, to honor his memory. Some hope they may even catch a glimpse of the King himself, whom they believe never actually left the building. The climax of the pilgrimage is a slow march through the gravesite where fans pause in silence and often tears flow as they leave flowers, teddy bears, portraits, and candles. I've been to Graceland, not on pilgrimage but out of curiosity. It's amazing to see. It's essentially a religious experience for some of these people who believe Elvis lives on forever, at least in their hearts.

Anybody here ever been on a pilgrimage? A pilgrimage generally involves a long journey made to some sacred place. I suppose Graceland qualifies, but typically they are made to places like Mecca in Saudi Arabia, or the Vatican in Rome, or the Basilica of the Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. As he or she makes the journey, the pilgrim hopes that at journey's end some deep desire or longing will be satisfied.

In a way, you can take a pilgrimage without ever leaving your hometown. Broaden the definition with me to see that every one of us is on a long journey of some sort or another to some end in life where we believe fulfillment or completion will be ours. The journey to find that one true soulmate, or to raise successful kids, or to achieve some level of financial security or vocational status, each of these is a long road many people travel. Some roads take on a more religious flavor, the quest to find true inner peace in life, or to achieve justice where none now exists, or to simply go to heaven when we die.

So let me ask you, what long road are you on today? And where do you imagine that journey taking you? What do you expect to find at the end when you reach your destination and how will things be different when you do? We're all pilgrims. It's good, therefore, to name your pilgrimage.

Every springtime Jews all over the ancient world would make pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover, the most sacred day of the year when all of Israel would remember the time God delivered them from slavery in Egypt. Literally hundreds of thousands of pilgrims would flood the city. For many of them, the last part of the journey was the difficult 16 mile stretch of road from Jericho up to Jerusalem. Listen to how one eye witness describes the journey of those 1st century pilgrims.

Mile after mile, all uphill, you wind up through the sandy hills of Jericho. You're starting out in Jericho at 850 feet below sea level, not far from the lowest point on earth, and climbing to Jerusalem which is nearly 2,500 feet above sea level. It's almost always hot. It seldom rains. It's dusty year round. The road stretches through steep canyons where robbers loved to hide in ambush. But when you finally reach the summit you immediately exchange barren, dusty desolation for lush, green beauty,

especially at Passover time in the spring. At the crest of the summit there it is glistening in the sun, the holy city of Jerusalem itself, on its own slightly smaller hill just across the narrow but steep valley. Bethany and Bethphage nestle on the Jericho side of the Mount of Olives. It's the end of the journey; the pilgrimage to end all pilgrimages; Passover-time in the city of God.¹

When we meet Jesus and his disciples here in Luke 19 this is where we find them, traveling from Jericho to Jerusalem along this ancient route with thousands and thousands of other pilgrims to celebrate the Passover feast in Jerusalem. 2000 years later, we know what happens in Jerusalem that next week. We know why Jesus is making this journey. Jesus certainly knows! He's been clear all along that the whole direction of his earthly life was pointed ultimately in the direction of the cross. But what about his fellow pilgrims, the disciples? Are they in on the secret? Do they have any idea what lies at the end of this pilgrimage? And to be fair, do we even know? Those of us following Jesus today, do we know what lies ahead on the road down which he is leading us? That's the question of the day.

Well, Luke tells us that when they come to the Mount of Olives, Jesus sends two of his disciples ahead into the village of Bethany, a place they visited often, with specific instructions: **“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.’”**

I love that Jesus gives them a pre-arranged secret password.

“Hey! Get your hands off our donkey?!”

“The Lord needs it.”

“Oh, well go right ahead. He's all yours.”

But pay attention. What seems random to us was anything but random to the disciples. These men had a sense of who Jesus was by now. For nearly three years they had been watching him walk on water, heal the sick, give sight to the blind, multiply loaves and fish, control the weather, cast out demons, and raise people from the dead. How could they not believe by now that he was the Messiah? At this point they must have been going out of their minds waiting for him to make his

move and declare his rightful place over Israel and lead God's people to defeat anybody who was against them.

It's Passover. Jerusalem is packed with pilgrims. Jesus' celebrity precedes him. The people are itching for a savior. The time is right! And so when Jesus called for the young colt they must have been beside themselves. You see, every Jew knew the Messianic prophesy from Zechariah 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.²**

When a king rode into a city on a mount, that king was declaring victory. He was now ruler over that city. Such an action was not perceived as an attack but a victory march, like a baseball team riding through a ticker-tape parade downtown *after* they have won the championship. So this was it. Jesus was about to fulfill ancient prophesy by publicly declaring – finally! - his true identity as Messiah. There is sheer audacity in the move, especially considering that the Jewish authorities had recently made clear that anybody who knew of the whereabouts of Jesus should report it so that he could be arrested.³ Instead of hiding, however, Jesus is about to create a major scene. He's forcing not only the hands of those who oppose him but forcing his very destiny.

Luke includes the detail here that Jesus wanted his disciples to bring him a colt that had never before been ridden. It's a small detail with big implications. First, in the Jewish world when you chose an animal to be used for sacred purposes you would always choose one that had not been previously employed in other services.⁴ Jesus doesn't just want a ride into town after a long journey. No, this colt is going to serve a sacred purpose. But also, can you imagine trying to ride an unbroken colt? The first time never goes smoothly, especially if it was a young animal being asked to go through a screaming crowd! Humanly speaking, no rider could do this. And yet, as commentator Don Carson points out, “In the midst of all this an unbroken young animal remains totally calm under the hands of the Messiah who controls nature, and stills the storm. Jesus is the Lord of all and under his hand nothing but

¹ N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox, 2001), 228-229.

² NRSV

³ John 11:57

⁴ See I Samuel 6:7

harmony and peace comes about.”⁵ There is no mistaking what Luke is telling us here. The Lord of Creation is calling for his mount that he might ride victorious into the city of God.

But imagine the scene from another perspective. Philip Yancey does so in his book *The Jesus I Never Knew*:

I imagine a Roman officer galloping up to check on the disturbance. He has attended processions in Rome, where they do it right. The conquering general sits in a chariot of gold, with stallions straining at the reins and wheel spikes flashing in the sunlight. Behind him, officers in polished armor display the banners captured from vanquished armies. At the rear comes a ragtag procession of slaves and prisoners in chains, living proof of what happens to those who defy Rome.

But in Jesus’ grand entrance, the adoring crowd makes up the ragtag procession: the lame, the blind, the children, the peasants from Galilee and Bethany. When the officer looks for the object of their attention he spies a forlorn figure, weeping, riding on no stallion or chariot but on the back of a baby donkey, a borrowed coat draped across its backbone serving as his saddle.⁶

What no Romans soldier could ever have realized that day was that this forlorn figure was a king, though a humble king. He was a messiah, but a crucified messiah. Lord, but a servant Lord. God, but God come to earth as a human. He comes riding on a mount, the symbol of victory, but since his mount is a humble young donkey this must be a victory gained in peace. How do all these things fit together? It’s been said that Jesus was the only person who ever lived who was incredibly humble without being modest. He is declaring here to be the Messiah, the Savior of the world. That’s not modest. But he does so by climbing on a donkey he means to carry him to die at the hands of those he came to save. It’s by far the most poignant picture of humility the world has ever seen.

He’s disciples will take it. Donkey or warhorse, it doesn’t matter. This is the moment and they seize it. The long desired goal of their pilgrimage is finally in sight. Notice that they take the initiative, throwing their cloaks on the colt and lifting Jesus up on top, which he allows them to do. As they then make their way down the Mount of Olives towards Jerusalem they

break into song. Nobody has to ask what song to sing, and everybody knows the words by heart.

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” It’s the refrain from Psalm 118, the ancient hymn Israel would always sing to give thanks to God for deliverance from enemies. Some scholars think the hymn was written after the first Passover when God delivered his people from Egypt. It’s the ancient version of Queen’s *We are the Champions of the World*. Pilgrims would always sing this song on the way to Jerusalem at Passover, but this time the disciples must have sang it from the bottom of their hearts. The time was now! God was about to defeat their foes and establish his kingdom on earth. **“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”**

But these pilgrims are all missing it, aren’t they? Through Luke’s eyes, aren’t we watching them miss it? Yes, Jesus doesn’t stop them from singing his praises. They are right, he is riding to victory. But does even a single one of them understand the road Jesus has chosen to travel towards that ultimate victory? They would have been puzzled and distressed, even disheartened, to learn that that road was marked with sacrifice, surrender, humility and death. In time, of course, they would come to understand. Rome was not his enemy, or theirs. Neither were the religious leaders who wanted Jesus dead. Sin was the enemy, and death, and the evil one who led the world into this curse. The Messiah was now going to conquer these enemies, but to conquer them by allowing himself to be delivered into their hands. You see, the way to life journeys through death. Sacrifice is the vehicle. Love is the weapon. This is the way of the Messiah and thus the way of any pilgrim who would come after him.

And it’s here that we see how Palm Sunday is a parable for us. We are here this morning, most of us at least, because we are pilgrims ourselves following Jesus. But do we really know where Jesus is leading us? To victory? Yes, of course! His promise is clear that in time he will come again and, by the power of the cross and the resurrection set all things right in this world once and for all. But what about the road from here to there? Do we realize where Jesus leads those who will follow him through this world?

Remember what Jesus told his disciples, both then and now:

Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is

⁵ Cited at <https://paulvanderklay.me/2012/03/21/notes-on-tim-kellers-sermon-into-jerusalem/>

⁶ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, c. 1995), 190.

it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? (Luke 9:23-25)⁷

Now, maybe you've figured this out better than I have, but I have to admit this is hard for me. I'm trying to follow Jesus in my life but I don't always like where he seems to be leading me. I don't want more trouble. I don't want to admit my needs. I don't want to love those who hate me and forgive those who try to hurt me. I don't want to hold on loosely to everything in this world, to trust God for my bread every single day. I don't want to put the needs of other people ahead of my own needs. I often don't want to rub shoulders with the poor. I don't want to graciously endure the mocking of those who ridicule people of faith like me. I don't want to look honestly at my own heart and confront whatever pride, racism, hypocrisy, deceit that lies hidden there.

You know what I do want? Truth is, I just want Jesus to lead me to peace, and assurance, and affirmation, and comfort, and happiness, and safety, out of the mess of this world not back into the center of it.

Again, maybe you've figured this out better than I have, but it's hard for me. Yes, Jesus is clear that those who lose their lives will gain them back and then some in the end. And he didn't just say that, he proved it at the cross and in the empty tomb! And yet how difficult it can be for us all to declare "**Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord**" when we discover, as the disciples discovered days later, that this pilgrimage we are on travels a road to victory that looks a whole lot different than what we thought it was like when we first set out. Palm Sunday is an incredible parable of the lifelong mismatch between where we think Jesus is leading us and where he is actually leading us. The destination is life, abundant and eternal life, but are we willing to travel the road that leads there?

Luke tells us that, "**Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop.'**" By the way, whenever you hear somebody refer to Jesus as teacher it's a clue that they are probably not his follower in the first place. Adherents to almost every other major religious faith in the world today would call Jesus a great teacher. It's a clue that they don't worship him as Savior and Lord, as the eternal Son of God. It's also a clue that they actually don't think he's a great teacher because the central point of his teaching was that he was Savior and Lord, the eternal Son of God.

We're not told why the religious leaders wanted this so-called teacher to stop his disciples, but we can guess. They understood the revolutionary nature of what was happening. There are enormous political repercussions if the authorities in Jerusalem believe that a messianic demonstration is headed their way. The Pharisees were no great lovers of Rome, but at least Rome, for the most part, kept the peace and let them go about their business. They were still given limited influence, an ability to control the people the way they believed they should be controlled. Now Jesus was threatening to upset the status quo. He didn't follow all their laws. He made friends with sinner, and lepers, and tax collectors, and worst of all Gentiles - all the sorts of people that needed to be kept down and out. He challenged their pious pretenses. He was a threat to them and their ways of life and so if he wouldn't silence himself, they would silence him.

And Jesus' response? "**I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would cry out.**" It's a reminder, for one, that Christ truly is Lord over all creation, and that the entire cosmos is involved in the events that we sometimes think involve humans alone. When Adam and Eve sin, the earth produces thistles and thorns. Isaiah sings of the day when cows and bears will graze together and the lion will lay down with the lamb. Matthew tells us that a special star appeared over Bethlehem to announce Jesus' birth. As Christ hung on the cross the world went dark with an eclipse of the sun for three hours. And when Jesus breathed his last, the earth shuddered and rocks cracked in two.⁸

All life is from God, and so the stones, just like us, are caught up in God's redemptive plan through Christ to bring blessing out of curse, life out of death, and the final reign of God's kingdom on earth. Paul writes in Romans 8:21, "**The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.**"

If we don't proclaim it ourselves, the very stones will cry out! Some things simply must be said. The truth will always find a way out. God will provide a witness, even if every human tongue is silenced. This humble King, forlorn in the eyes of some, sitting on a young donkey on his way to Jerusalem, truly is the only real hope the world has ever known and the only hope the world will ever need. He has come to set us free, to make us favored, to restore and redeem not only people but all creation. If we trust him, and follow him, that will be our destiny. But the road between here and

⁸ I'm indebted here to Fred B. Craddock for the imagery and references, *Interpretation Commentary: Luke* (John Knox Press, 1990), 228.

⁷ NIV

there is not easy and does not often go where we wish it would go. This pilgrimage is hard. But by the grace of God, those who simply surrender to the way will find themselves carried along to a glorious end.

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

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Have you ever taken a pilgrimage of any sort? Where did you go? What were you hoping to discover or gain when you got there?
2. Read Luke 19:28-40. What stands out to you from this very familiar story?
3. Jesus often instructed his disciples and others to keep his identity (as Messiah) secret. Why does he seem to embrace their efforts to exalt him as Messiah on Palm Sunday?
4. The disciples begin to sing Psalm 118, a song of victory of deliverance from enemies. Jesus doesn't stop them. Is this the right song for them to sing on this occasion? Would they have continued singing that song if they knew what actually awaited Jesus in Jerusalem (i.e. the cross)?
5. As you follow Jesus in your life today, have you considered or discovered that he is leading you somewhere different than where you initially thought he was leading you?
6. If following Jesus in this life easy or difficult?
7. Jesus says that if we are silent, refusing to bear witness to him as Lord and Savior, the very stones will cry out in our place. What could this mean?
8. What is one thing that you believe Christ is trying to teach you through this text and this message, one thing that will force to you think and live differently?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Jesus is a King. That's what his disciples call him.
How is he a different sort of King than all other kings?