

“Finding Strength to Face Life and Death”
April 13, 2025

Isaiah 50:4-9
Luke 19:28-40

“After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.”

If we want to walk into Jerusalem with Jesus, we must first back up a little and listen to what he said and consider why he said it.

Some of what Jesus said before heading to Jerusalem was good news. He visited the house of Zacchaeus, a despised, corrupt, and rich tax collector. Zacchaeus repented—that is, he turned in a new direction, promising to give half of his possessions to the poor and to pay back four times anyone whom he had defrauded. Imagine!

On hearing this, Jesus said: “Today salvation has come to this house,” adding that he had come “to seek out and to save the lost.”

That’s good news—for Zacchaeus and for us.

But immediately after that good news, Jesus tells a disturbing parable about a nobleman who went to a distant country to get royal power for himself and then return.

This was a common practice at the time.

In 40 B.C., the brutal Herod the Great went to Rome to find support for his power. He returned, ready for retribution, and executed his opponents.

But in this parable, Jesus seems to have in mind Herod’s son, Archelaus, who traveled to Rome seeking the support of Caesar that he might be the successor to his father. Archelaus’s power in Judea was challenged by some of the Jewish people, who sent a delegation to Rome to complain about his greed and ruthlessness, which included killing 3,000 people near the Temple.

Caesar sided with Archelaus.

Jesus ended his parable telling of the king who said: “As for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and slaughter them in my presence.”

This is a harsh story.

Who can hear these words?

Perhaps those who live in harsh times under harsh circumstances.

Such people would be the residents of Judea in the time of Jesus as well as the early Christians who first heard the Gospel according to Luke. James Carroll tells us that “The rule for populations conquered by Rome was straightforward: Submit or die.” Time and again the Jewish people would not submit. The response was swift and brutal.

The Gospel—the Good News of Jesus Christ—came to those who knew cruelty and oppression firsthand.

Who can hear these words?

Those who have known brutality and injustice and warfare over the past 2000 years.

Those who know brutality and injustice and warfare today.

As our nation sends people to the notorious prison in El Salvador without due process and explores further similar actions, as voices from both Washington and the leaders of some churches speak of the “sin of empathy,” all under the leadership of a president who told us the first time he ran for the office, “Real power is fear,” Perhaps even we can hear these words of Jesus with fresh ears and open hearts.

This day that we remember as Palm Sunday occurred in the context of war and brutality and oppression. It is only as we understand this that we can appreciate what happened as Jesus entered Jerusalem.

We remember this story because it tells us about Jesus. But perhaps even more it tells us about the disciples—not those 12 Apostles alone, but what was by that time a growing number of people who followed Jesus, including, as Luke points out several times, women who were providing for Jesus from their resources.

And because this story tells us something about those first followers of Jesus, it tells us something about ourselves as well.

The word “disciple” indicates someone who is being taught. These are people who are learning.

They are learning to follow Jesus.

By now they are beginning to understand something of the cost of that following. In the early days of Lent, we heard the story of the Pharisees warning Jesus that Herod was seeking his life—a warning that Jesus shrugged off, basically saying, “Tell him I’ll see him in Jerusalem.”

After that, and after hearing Jesus’ final, troubling parable, two disciples do what Jesus tells them to do. It was simple enough—and strange enough: “Go into the village and you’ll find a colt. Untie it and bring it to me. Oh—and if anyone asks what you are doing, just say: ‘The Master—the *real* Master—needs it.’”

Following in the way of Jesus Christ is often about the small things.

And even when it’s about the big things—illness and death, strained relationships and war, or love, birth, and rebirth—even then it’s often about the small things: sitting with someone who isn’t sure who you are or might not even know you’re there, waiting in silence, talking about something trivial that reveals something greater.

You’ve no doubt learned that it’s often about the small things: the immense task of nurturing children in faith means cutting construction paper on Saturday night; the endless work of feeding the hungry means cooking a meatloaf; the impossible job of comforting a grieving friend means making a casserole; the weekly process of preparing to worship the living God means changing light bulbs.

Small things.

When we listen to Luke's account of the Palm Sunday story, we are reminded again that our actions, however small or seemingly inconsequential, are the ways that we make openings for God's new creation in the world. Our actions are the ways in which we find strength to face life—and death.

Yes, there are times when people are called to do great or difficult things. There are times when we are surprised by our own great courage, our own strong love, our own deep compassion. For most of us, most of the time, it's the small things we do that will prepare the way for the ministry of Christ in the world.

Through the events of this day, we are learning to follow Jesus in life and in death.

As we find strength, we also find our voice.

This is the day the disciples begin to find their voice. They have walked along with Jesus this far—listening and watching—and in doing so, they have developed what Isaiah describes as “the tongue of those who are taught.” They do not hold back. Their shouts announce: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” Those are not safe words in a city governed by Pilate and Herod in the name of Rome and with Rome's brutal power.

Still, they raise their voices in spite of the danger that they and their leader, their Lord, face.

As Luke tells the story, the disciples are so loud that the Pharisees are concerned. They implore Jesus: “Tell your disciples to stop.”

Is this a request of contempt or of concern? Certainly, it is often interpreted as a rejection of the acclaim of the disciples, as an attempt to put Jesus in his place.

But remembering the violence and brutality of the Roman occupation, could it not be that the Pharisees, who had already voiced their warnings about Herod to Jesus, now want him to quiet the celebration for his own safety?

“Who are my adversaries?” the prophet Isaiah asks. “Let them confront me.”

The stones will not shout out because the followers of Jesus will not be silent—nor will he silence them. We speak up and we speak out. And we know, of course, that all too often those who will not be silent, those who speak up against evil are not delivered from it but seem to be delivered unto evil.

Through the events of this day, we are finding our voice.

The disciples are learning to see the world.

And their sight is growing in accuracy.

Listen again to what they say: “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.”

That sounds, well, glorious—until we remember what Luke tells us were the words of the angels at the birth of Jesus: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, good will among people.”

The angels might have been on to something. Perhaps they could see what we are not yet able to see. Perhaps they announced only the beginning of a peace that was yet to come to fruition. Perhaps their words were meant to encourage all humankind in our efforts toward peace.

When Jesus enters Jerusalem, his followers do not cry “Peace, peace,” for there is no peace.

They see the harsh reality around them as clearly as we see the brutality of our contemporary world. And they do not turn away.

Nor should we.

In this world truth and justice, love and beauty can be defeated and trampled down. Evil is strong indeed.

We are often defeated.

Even Jesus was defeated and died.

The words of the king in the parable: “Slaughter them in my presence,” echo so strongly in our hearts because of all that we have seen and heard—indeed, because of all we are seeing and hearing in these days.

This is the reality of the world in which we live. This is the reality that is given its fullest expression in the week ahead: Glory to God in the highest heaven. And on earth, a cross.

This week we will hear again the great things that Jesus did “for us and for our salvation,” as the ancient Nicene Creed puts it. We will proclaim again that Jesus was betrayed, suffered, and was crucified that a broken and hurting humanity might know healing and new life in the resurrection.

When we are tempted to be petty or despairing or mean-spirited, when we are tempted to throw out all our values for a quick reward, let us remember this. Beyond the brutality and violence, are the great things that God has done for us and for all people—this, after all, is what those who have lived in the midst of brutality and violence have seen and affirmed for 2000 years.

Through the events of this day, this week, we are learning to see the world.

We are learning to speak.

We are learning to follow Jesus.

In the wilderness. Out in the open. In uncertain times. In unfamiliar territory. Among friends and family.

We are finding strength.

Do not give up for Lent. Find the strength that God offers to each of us and to all of us for living and for dying, as in Christ we rise to new life.