

“Salvation Surprising and Insuppressible”

Luke 19:28-40; Isaiah 43:16-21 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our eyes and ears might be open to the signs of your salvation. In Jesus' name, Amen.

It is a day bursting with contradictions, this “Palm” Sunday that leads us into Holy Week. Jesus asks for a donkey, to make very clear that if he’s going to become the “King of the Jews,” it will be in the humblest interpretation of the tradition possible. And we grant him the donkey, but then insist on adding in every royal trapping we can find – processions, anthems, laud, honor... “To you, now high exalted, our melody we raise!”

All along God has been telling us that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts and that God’s ways are not our ways. All along, God has been saying, “I’m doing a new thing. Stop reminiscing about that vanquished army that ‘got drowned.’ Doing A. New. Thing.” So why, when God’s new thing starts to emerge, do we keep imagining that it’s actually that same old thing, where might makes right and our Savior must be a conquering hero?

You can learn a lot about humanity just looking at the musical treatment of Palm Sunday. Or just the fact that we call it “Palm Sunday.” Did you notice that Luke’s treatment of the story includes no branches of any kind? Just cloaks, laid on the donkey and on the road. I guess the decorating committee thought palm branches

look prettier than a pile of clothes. You wouldn't want someone thinking it's Laundry Sunday!

But also, the children! So many of the songs we sing on this day reference "the children." It's enough to make someone assume that children are central to the story. Which is odd, because none of the four gospel versions of this story even mention children specifically. Here's my theory on that: This story contains more enthusiasm than grown-ups are comfortable with. If we're imagining a crowd shouting, we're most likely to picture an angry mob. So if a crowd is instead full of people happily hollering, it must be because it's mostly children. You know how those kids love to yell.

None of this makes any sense, of course. Any sports fan can tell you that a stadium of happy fans can make plenty of noise cheering on their team. Surely adults could muster up similar passion for the Messiah? But somehow, we keep trying to pin it on "the children." What is it that we're trying to avoid? Is it just the volume, the enthusiasm? Or is the level of misunderstanding we want some distance from? Because there is a lot of misunderstanding going on here, isn't there? This crowd wants to focus on the king part, not the donkey part. They're looking for a familiar salvation, the kind that will overthrow their oppressors and make them the victors. We would love that, wouldn't we? Some higher power to come in and bring down those who wield power unjustly, setting all things right. But it turns out, once again, God is doing a New Thing.

The way Luke writes the story is interesting because of what he leaves out. Not only does he not have tree branches, the word “Hosanna” is nowhere to be found. Instead, he gives the crowd a chant that brings to mind the song of the angels to the shepherds: “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!” “Gloria in excelsis!” Does this remind us that God’s been doing this New Thing for a while now? Do you not perceive it? What is Luke inviting us to consider by singing to us of peace, instead of inviting us to shout out “Hosanna! Save us!”?

There is a lot of temptation in these chaotic days, to just shout “Hosanna” and hope that someone else will take care of the rest. For too long, we have treated God like a vending machine, asking for the exact benefit we need, and then pounding a little when we don’t get what we want. Perhaps Luke is inviting us to quiet our demands for the precise flavor of salvation we’re looking for and ponder in our hearts what our role in creating God’s peace might be. Is a New Thing emerging? Can we perceive it? Can we become heralds of its arrival?

Luke’s version is also interesting because of what he includes that isn’t found anywhere else: those stones. No other gospel includes the Pharisees’ contemptuous commentary on the unruliness of his followers. None of the others have Jesus giving this hint as to the cosmic nature of what is happening here. It is lovely that humans are involved, but it seems that we’re not entirely necessary. All the more reason why we need to pay close attention to what God is actually doing, rather than running ahead with the story as we’d like to tell it.

The New Thing God describes in Isaiah 43 doesn't seem to primarily involve humans either. The first sign is rivers, rivers in the desert, that is, where you wouldn't expect a river to be. And who recognizes this sign of glory? Not the people, but the jackals and the ostriches. It almost makes me wish our tradition had drawn a stronger connection over the centuries between this passage and Palm Sunday, rather than Zechariah 9:9 with its donkey. Can you imagine how fun it would be to have an ostrich at church? But back to those stones. Do you think we would notice if the rocks were crying out praise to God? Would we perceive that New thing?

I have a feeling we might call that a natural disaster. Would it look like an earthquake or a rock slide? Is there anyway it wouldn't be seen as potentially dangerous? Rocks are not a particularly merciful form of matter. Ostriches aren't either, for that matter. Could we perceive the message they are sharing? Or would we just feel the need to defend ourselves? All these portents combine together to show us that the New Thing God is doing is bigger than us. This Messiah we want to herald as a conquering king is actually a Teacher here to show us a new way, to demonstrate that might does not make right, no matter how convincing our present circumstances may seem. It's really only a New Thing because we keep forgetting; we keep letting other perspectives talk us out of believing in the way of Jesus.

It's not an easy path, the one we embark upon today. Holy Week is not just about the days between Palm Sunday and Easter. It's a road map for what it means to follow Christ. This is what it means to live as a Christian: to follow a path that may

require self-sacrifice and suffering. Holy Week invites us to live that New Thing: to walk through the world in such a way that we are constantly bearing witness to the power of love and rejecting the narratives of redemptive violence and might makes right. Can we perceive the New Thing God is doing? Could we be the New Thing God is doing? I, for one, would hate to miss out while the rocks go on ahead of us and get the job done on their own.

The salvation Jesus is offering us may not look like the rescue we've been longing for. It is cosmic in ways we may not comprehend. It is gentle in ways we may find hard to believe effective. It is humble in ways that make it hard to talk about. It requires our own hard work in ways that we might find challenging. It includes people we may be a little anxious to break bread with. It will ask things of us that we may not be ready to confess or give up. But it's the real deal. It is true salvation. It is the New Thing God has been trying to give us for eons. It is the peace of heaven and the day that the Lord has made. It is surprising and insuppressible. It will arrive whether we recognize it or not. But don't you want to be part of it? May it be so. Amen.