

First Presbyterian Church
“Close Encounters with Jesus: The Disciples”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Psalm 118:19-29; Luke 19:29-40

How many of you love Palm Sunday? I ask because it is one of my favorite Sundays of the year. I love it because the children get to fully participate, we get to sing some of my favorite hymns, there are palms being waved, and it reminds us that Spring is upon us and that Easter is only a week away. It is a wonderful Sunday. Yet, this love of Palm Sunday raises a question this morning, which is, what do we do with a palmless Palm Sunday? Meaning what do we do with a Palm Sunday story that has no palms? Or, no crowds chanting Jesus’ name? I ask because our story this morning has none of those elements. If we look at Luke’s retelling of Jesus’ entry into the city, we cannot find palms, or shouting crowds, though we do find a few people laying their cloaks on the road. The only people who are engaged in any sort of outcry are the disciples. Why no palms? Why no crowds? Why, in fact, if we are honest with the text is Jesus not the center of attention as he is in the other stories? The answer I would give you this morning is that what I believe Luke is doing is offering us a look at the disciples’ final exam before Jesus’ arrest and death. Let me explain.

Jesus has taken three years to train his followers. He has taught them. He has mentored them. He has sent them out to test their skills. He has quizzed them and challenged them. But now the hour has come and Jesus’ in-person ministry here on earth is coming to an end. And so, the question becomes, are the disciples ready? Can they do what Jesus desires them to do after he is gone? Thus, in Luke’s mind, Jesus sets the stage for a three-part exam...all of the parts of which are central not only to the coming ministry of the disciples and the church, but they have their roots in Jewish scriptures. In other words, the three parts of this exam have been given to God’s people from Genesis through Malachi; from creation to the coming of Christ. And here are the three parts: listening, acting, and professing. Jesus wants to know if the disciples are prepared to do these three things.

Jesus begins by testing the disciples on their listening skills. He offers them a series of commands which seem a bit complicated and convoluted. *“Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied 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.’”* Even for Jesus who has said and done many strange things, this was a bit odd. Why did he need a donkey? Why one on which no one had ridden? How will we know which donkey is the right donkey? Will this all work or will we get arrested for stealing some guy’s donkey? The questions were endless. But the heart of this request was whether the disciples would listen with attentive ears making them capable of carrying out this series of requests; because if they could not remember this set of instructions, how could they remember all that Jesus had taught them? For you see, listening is key to the faith of God’s people. Throughout the Old Testament when God’s people listened; listened to the Torah, listened to the prophets, listened to God, things went well for them. They became capable of living lives filled with abundance and joy. When they failed to listen to Torah, the prophets, and God, they wandered away from life giving ways and towards death dealing ways. Jesus wanted to know if the disciples were listening.

Jesus continues the test by seeing if the disciples will act. Will they be faithful to the command that Jesus has given them? This was always the question because it is one thing to listen and take in information, but it is another to follow through on the information that is given. I'm not sure if any of you have noticed this about people who come to you for advice. They listen, but then they often simply go and do what they were always planning to do in the first place. We often see the same thing at school, or work, or in society, in that regardless of how much information is given and how much people listen to and take in this information, they never act on that information. This was the tendency of the people of God. In the book of Judges, the continuing line is that even though the people listened to God they would always then go and do what was "right in their own eyes." So, would the disciples listen and act? The answer is yes. *"So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, 'Why are you untying the colt?' They said, 'The Lord needs it.' Then they brought it to Jesus."* The disciples have now passed the first two parts of the exam: they listened, and they acted.

The third part of the exam will be the most difficult, at least in Luke's telling of the tale, because to profess is a dangerous act. In the other stories there are crowds that celebrate Jesus' coming into the city. It is as if there is this great groundswell of support for Jesus and his message of God's love and Torah faithfulness. In a sense, in the other tellings the disciples sort of disappear into the crowds clamoring for a messiah. Yet here the disciples stand alone. If anyone is going to profess Jesus as king, it will be his followers and no one else. We know that this is dangerous because to pronounce anyone other than Caesar or Caesar's appointed king as king, was to be in open rebellion against the powers of the moment. We know this is dangerous as well, because the Pharisees are worried and tell Jesus to still his followers. And by the way I think the Pharisees are worried about Jesus because they had earlier warned him not to go to Jerusalem because the Romans there were looking to do him in. Again, this has always been the struggle of the people of God. In the face of the principalities and powers of the world, would the people of God proclaim that YHWH was king? Would they be willing to publicly declare that their first loyalty was to God and to God's messiah, Jesus? How did the disciples do? *"As Jesus was 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 they had seen, saying, Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord."* They professed. They passed.

So, what about us? How are we doing? Well, if this morning is any indication, I think we are passing as well. I say this because of Allison and her baptism. This morning we listened to Jesus call us to welcome children in his name and to the Apostle Peter who tells us that the promises of God's love are for the children of those who believe. Then we acted. We came together as a community and baptized Allison. And as a reminder, baptism in the Presbyterian church is an act of the whole community which is why we don't do private baptisms. But we acted on what we heard. Finally, we professed. We professed that this baptism was not simply an act of a secular community, or a rite of passage, but it was an act of a community that believes in the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ and that that love and grace has claimed Allison.

The challenge for us then as individuals is to put ourselves to the same three-part test as were the disciples, and as we are as a community. It is to ask ourselves, am I listening to God in Christ, am I acting on what I hear, and am I professing to others that my way of living and loving is because I am a follower of Jesus? That is my challenge for all of us this week and always.