

A Faith So Loud...
Luke 19:28-40
Colebrook Congregational Church
March 20, 2016 / Palm Sunday

There is a SciFi show that I frequently reference and is commonly used in youth ministries, called Babylon 5, and this is because, starting in the second season, a bunch of monks starting living on the space station, and would frequently allow the plot to include issues of faith, redemption, sacrifice, and salvation. One episode started with the main protagonist and the head monk waiting for some other clergy to arrive. The head monk is not happy about this, and started to bicker with a Baptist pastor immediately. The Pastor replied to a comment with, "Well, the good Lord says to make a joyful noise!" The Monk replied, "I've heard you sing, and I don't think what the Lord had in mind!"

A lot of today's selection is just Luke describing events, and there isn't a lesson or word of advice from Jesus until the very end, where he responds to a Pharisee who wants Him to silence the joyful noises made by the crowd, which of course, He would not.

Today's selection in the Gospel of Luke is paralleled pretty closely with the Gospel of Mark. Both are pretty close to Matthew with some differences, especially a quote from one of the prophets, something that Mark & Luke seem to be assuming their audiences already know.

From the Prophecy of 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." Sounds a lot like how Jesus entered Jerusalem.

Another big difference between the accounts in the Gospels is that in John, the crowd comes out of Jerusalem to greet Jesus. In the other Gospels, the crowd is the Disciples and the pilgrims that have been following them.

Before the selection starts, Jesus is in Jericho, which is to the west and a bit north of Jerusalem, and directly north of the Dead Sea. He talks with a tax collector there and shares a parable, and now, He is heading to Jerusalem.

However, there is a bit of a geographical oddity in the next verse. Bethpage, according to the Talmud, is on the western slope of the Mount of Olives; and Bethany is on the southeastern slope, separated from Jerusalem by a valley. Both of these places are south west of Jerusalem, and Jesus was in Jericho, which is northwest of Jerusalem, so there is a bit of confusion as to why did He go the long way around? Maybe that's where the good donkeys are?

The verses where Jesus gives the Disciples instructions on finding the donkey have been used to suggest that the entry was prearranged by Jesus, but that seems pretty uncharacteristic for Him to do that, compared with His behavior in the rest of Gospels! It is more likely that Luke is presenting this as the omniscience of Jesus. And then the word translated as “colt” is used to refer to the young of various different types of animals.

When Jesus approaches the city, He is shown many gestures of respect and honor. But note that Luke does not mention the palms, only the garments! Then Luke stresses the site of where this is happening, on the descent from the Mount of Olives, which fulfills another one of Zechariah's prophecies (14:14), where a Messiah is described as coming from the Mount of Olives with serious intentions.

The Disciples start praising God, and Luke carefully specifies that. They are honoring Jesus, but praising God. Luke omits the familiar “hosannas,” replacing what was being said with a paraphrase of Psalm 118.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees, declining their request that He rebuke His Disciples by quoting the Prophet Habakkuk 2:11, “The stones will cry out from the wall, and the plaster will respond from the woodwork.” Jesus was not about to let the crowd's faithfulness be silenced! Though, the Pharisees did have a valid concern! Remember that the Romans were always on a hair trigger for any disturbance, and the Entry could have led to another pre-emptive action by the Legions! The crowd was putting everyone at risk!

While thinking about that, I was reminded of a thought experiment associated with Thomas Aquinas in medieval times called the “Omnipotence Paradox.” It asks, “if an omnipotent being is able to perform any action, then it should

be able to create a task that it is unable to perform. Hence, this being cannot perform all actions.” It is a logical contradiction.

The best known version of this is, “Could God create a stone so heavy that even God could not lift it?” I did find another version by Bart Simpson: “If God could do anything, could [God] create a hot dog so big, that even [God] couldn't eat it?”

I was wondering about the crowd and their faithful jubilations, that the Pharisees wanted Jesus to rebuke. Can someone have a faith so large and so loud that even Jesus could not quiet it?

So I started to think about those whose faith could not be silenced. The obvious ones are martyrs, and there are plenty of those through history. People who stood by their faith and gave their all for it. The first Christian martyr was Stephen, a Deacon of the Church in Jerusalem, witnessed by Saul, who became Paul. In modern times, there is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran priest who stood up to the Nazis.

But on the other hand, I was reminded of that same SciFi show that I mentioned earlier. In an other episode, two faithful people are having a congenial disagreement about a course of action that one of them was about to take. One said to the other, that it is easy to sacrifice oneself for their beliefs, because it frees them from their obligation. Another part of the challenge being issued to the other faithful was to not pursue a cause worth dying for, but rather, a cause worth living for.

And that made me think about a friend of Bonhoeffer, a Swiss Reformed pastor named Karl Barth, a theologian known to every seminarian, and is considered to be the 20th century's greatest Protestant theologian. Even Pope Pius XII called him the most important theologian since Thomas Aquinas. And he was active in Germany during the rise of the Third Reich. And I said back in seminary that I would never even mention this man's name from the pulpit...and today, I'm proven wrong.

So the churches in Germany, from the Treaty of Augsburg in 1555 until 1918,

had a very close relationship with the state, and until the unification of Germany, what kind of church they were was determined by the religion of the prince of their region. When the Nazis rose to power in the state, a parallel group called German Christians were able to take over the vast majority of the Protestant churches through elections or appointments, and proceeded to Nazify them.

They tossed out the Old Testament all together. They re-wrote the New Testament to remove any Jewishness and to make Jesus seem more like a Germanic hero from epic adventures. They defrocked any clergy with Jewish ancestors, encouraged antisemitism, removed any non-Germanic elements from worship, added German folklore to the proceedings, and then placed the Fuhrer as the supreme authority, even above the Word.

Karl Barth was not going to tolerate that. He wrote what is now called the Barmen Declaration, which rejected the Nazis' interference with the internal and theological issues of the church. The Church was not to be subordinated by the state, that the Church was the property of Jesus. That the Church follows the Word, not the whims of the state. He wrote this in general terms, not specifically targeting Nazi policies by name. But still, it was obvious what he was talking about. And then, he sent it directly to Adolf Hitler.

This led to the creation of the Confessing Church, which then, with Karl Barth's leadership, politely, yet specifically attacked the Nazification of the churches in Germany in a memorandum. They protested the anti-Christian tendencies of the Nazi Party, denounced antisemitism, and demanded that the Nazis cease interfering with the internal affairs of the church. And then sent this directly to Adolf Hitler.

Karl Barth survived all this, surprisingly, and continued to live his faith loudly for a couple more decades after the war.

Like the crowds that greeted Jesus' Entry into Jerusalem, raising their voices loudly in faithful expressions praising God, let no one silence your expressions of faith, however those expressions manifest. Sing the songs, paint the pictures, tell the stories, help your neighbors. And no matter what,

remember to make a joyful noise! And ignore anyone who says that's not what God had in mind.

Please join me in the spirit of prayer:

O God, we give you thanks for the gift of your Word and for the inspiration that it has provided through the ages for faithful expressions in so many forms: Be it artistic expressions of all types, in paintings and photographs and stained glass and sculptures and even a television show; Be it in the written word, taking a stand against that which is an anathema to Your message of Love; And be it in music raised from pipes and throats reaching up into the heavens with their songs of praise. Amen.

Intercessory Prayer

[PAUSE]

Benevolent God, as Jesus in the days before His passion, offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears, we pray for those who suffer, those who are in need, and those who seek reconciliation.

We give you thanks for all the blessings and gifts you have given us, for those you have led into our lives and for moving us into the lives of others. And we thank you for using us as instruments of your divine love for us all.

We pray for the forgiveness of sins known and unknown, for falling short of how we should be towards ourselves, towards our fellow humans, and to all of Your Creation. May we be reassured of Your forgiveness, so we may try to do better and make amends as we move forward.

We pray for everyone who needs Your help. For those who are unwell or wounded in mind, body, or spirit. We pray to be of assistance if we can, and for all those who have dedicated their lives to helping others. We pray to bring comfort to the lonely, shelter to the exposed and vulnerable, and nourishment to the hungry. May you fortify us to better serve you through our service to our neighbors.

We pray for ourselves. We pray for Your guidance in all that we do, to live up to the standard Jesus set for us. We pray that we recognize your messengers and those You send to help us and redirect us for who they are, and that we show the wisdom to heed them. And we pray for the strength to resist the temptations in our daily lives and continue the Lenten sacrifices that we offer up to You.

We especially pray for:

God of compassion, You know our faults and yet you promised to forgive. Keep us in Your presence and give us your wisdom. Open our hearts to gladness, call dry bones to dance, and restore to us the joy of your salvation. Amen.

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it. I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD. The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Luke 19:28-40

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "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.'"

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; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.

As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As 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, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

