

*For Crying Out Loud*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*Isaiah 53, 1 Peter 2:21-25, Luke 19:28-48*

Our third Scripture lesson today comes from Luke 19:28-48. We have moved ahead in Luke to Jesus' entry in Jerusalem. At this point, Jesus has been throughout Israel spreading the word of God's Kingdom. Here, at the conclusion of His ministry, He is welcomed as a king coming home. Here's what Luke writes: "After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it.'" Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They replied, "The Lord needs it." They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace-- but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you." Then he entered the temple area and began driving out those who were selling. "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be a house of prayer'; but you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words."

Living in a nature preserve can be kind of fun. Some of you have seen pictures of our backyard, which contains a small forest area that extends from our house out to the Clinton River. It's a beautiful place to be...most of the time. But what we never expected was how many critters find their way into the heart of suburban Detroit. We've seen deer roaming five feet away from our back porch. We've got ducks living in the pond that formed in our woods after the snow melted. We saw rabbits frolicking in the snow. It's like having a national forest without the hiking!

But the problem is, we've also got some varmints. We had a groundhog living in the root structure of a tree cut down long ago. We had an opossum who's so adjusted to city life that he comes out in the day time! And we've also got raccoons. Now raccoons aren't known for being the greatest creatures to have around...but when a pregnant one takes up residence in a chimney pipe...that's bad news. Now all these creatures were incredibly cute to look at from a distance. The groundhog was even named "Hoggy." Behind a thick sliding glass door, they're wonderful.

But it's another thing when a raccoon starts making a racket that sounds like a one-man cat fight at 5 in the morning. It's not good when you have to worry about a woodchuck getting under your home's foundation. And opossums...did you know that opossums have more teeth than any other mammal on the planet? All of a sudden, it's not such a pretty picture. So this week, we had to call out an animal control company to help take care of these furry friends. It's all part of the circle of life...they'll take good care of the animals someplace far away, and my wallet will take good care of the animal control folks. It's not the circle of life I was hoping for, but that's life.

As I started thinking about it this week, I realized that this pattern actually isn't all that uncommon for us. There are many things in our lives that appear to be wonderful until we live with them for a while. We love having a cute little puppy around for a while, but wake-up walks at 4am and the food bill when that puppy becomes a 60-pound dog can get old pretty fast. We quickly get bored with the ITunes that were the hottest thing when we downloaded them just a couple of months ago. And all of us have heard the concept of the "honeymoon" phase, where newlyweds think that their spouse is the greatest person ever...until one day, they don't. The excitement and fun of being married sometimes wears thin under the stresses of jobs and bills and kids. It's the reason that marriage vows state, "Til death do us part." Our vows remind us that we have promised to each other that we will plow through the hard times together, because those times will come.

Luke's lesson for us this week emphasizes much the same thing. Luke gives us a portrait of Jesus that is both compelling and difficult. Jesus is not easy to define as He enters Jerusalem. He is pictured as a prophet and a king with a crowd around Him singing God's praises. But His prophecy becomes hard to take as He weeps over Jerusalem and pronounces her destruction. And when His first act in Jerusalem is to drive people out of the temple, it becomes more difficult to stand by His side. Ultimately, that's what we're going to look at this morning...how we are called to surrender ourselves to Jesus, both the parts of Him we love and the parts of Him we don't understand.

When Jesus enters Jerusalem, we see Him tell a couple of his disciples to go get a colt from one of the villages and what to do when they are asked about taking it. This seems like a really bizarre thing to prophesy about! But Jesus is perfectly within His rights to do this. The Jewish teachings of the time said that in a time of need, a rabbi could use someone's animal and return it later. Jewish tradition also stated that royalty entering a city should ride an unbroken animal – a horse or a donkey. Jesus' actions establish that He is a king. It seems odd to us that a man riding a donkey's colt would be seen this way, but that has to do with the setting. At the time Jesus enters Jerusalem, there are thousands of pilgrims gathering to celebrate the Passover in the coming week. Even if they rode animals on their way there, when they came near to Jerusalem, as pilgrims they would get off the animals and walk into the city. Jesus riding into Jerusalem establishes Him as someone special.

Now today's reading doesn't include some of the elements that we typically associate with this day because Luke's audience was Greek. We're used to celebrating Palm Sunday with, well, palm branches! We also sing "Hosanna" in celebration. But these things weren't familiar to the Greeks. Hosanna is a Hebrew word of praise others wouldn't have understood.

The palm branches themselves also signified something important to the Israelites. Palm branches were used at the start of the Festival of Booths. During that festival, the Israelites would make tent-like booths for themselves to live in for a short time to remember how their ancestors were liberated from Egypt and lived in booths while they wandered in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. When they waved their palm branches and put them before Jesus as He entered Jerusalem, it meant that they saw Him as their liberator. They believed He was coming to Jerusalem to become an earthly king who would overthrow the Romans. The reason that we use palm branches to celebrate this day is because we see Jesus as our liberator too...our liberator from sin and death.

But to the Jewish officials and to the Pharisees, these people were just asking for trouble. They were creating a disturbance that might send the wrath of Rome down on Israel. The whole group of all the disciples who followed Jesus, maybe in the hundreds or even thousands, is praising God for the miracles Jesus has done. They've gone so far as to put their cloaks down on the ground as a sign of their loyalty to Him. They are showing their allegiance is not to Caesar but to Jesus. This makes the Pharisees nervous, especially since they have decided that Jesus is not their messiah. The Pharisees don't even address Him as rabbi, giving Him the respect He deserves; instead, they use the lesser term in Greek for teacher and order Him to tell His disciples to stop this celebration.

But instead, Jesus rebukes them. He is the King of glory, the ruler of all creation. The disciples were made to worship Him along with everything else in all the universe! Jesus tells the Pharisees that the very rocks would cry out if they didn't. There is nothing wrong with what they are doing. In fact, it's one of the times the crowd gets it just right. They will not let anyone stop them from praising God and exalting God's Son.

But then the story turns somber. As Jerusalem comes into view, Jesus weeps. He prophesies what will happen to the city because its people will reject Him. Jesus' prophecy does come true, by the way...in 70 AD, Jerusalem is crushed, the city laid waste, and the temple utterly destroyed. To this day, the temple has not been rebuilt; in fact, a mosque now sits on a portion of its space. But to those who were joyfully singing and shouting, this has got to be something of a mystery. It's maybe even an insult. This crowd is caught up in the excitement of having a messiah, a chosen one, somebody to free them from their oppression under the Romans...and he's crying? This isn't what we expect of a king. We don't get any reaction from the crowd from this event, but it's clear that Jesus isn't celebrating in an earthly way. He knows what lies ahead of Him. Over and over again He has told His disciples that He will die at the hands of the religious authorities in Jerusalem. He knows what awaits Jerusalem for its disobedience. But to the crowd surrounding Him, this is a strange way to show His appreciation.

But then things get even harder when Jesus makes it into Jerusalem proper. His first stop: the temple, the place where God was worshipped, the place where sacrifices were offered, the place that was the center of Israelite life, even for those who lived far away. In a brief summary, Luke tells us that Jesus kicked out people who were selling goods in the temple. Why exactly does He do this? Jesus uses language from the Old Testament to describe the situation. In Isaiah 56, the temple is called a "house of prayer for all the nations." But Jesus also quotes Jeremiah 7:11, which said that the Israelites had made the temple a "den of thieves."

The temple was never meant to be a place of commerce. It was meant as a place where people could come and worship God. But to the average person, Jesus' actions are harsh, maybe even criminal. Typical pilgrims weren't going to be able to bring the animals to be sacrificed for the Passover with them. They had to buy them in Jerusalem. The Mosaic law required that the offerings to the temple be paid in Israelite money, so someone had to convert their funds from one currency to another. These were part and parcel of worship at the temple. So it's hard for them to understand why Jesus gets so upset about it.

But it's so much more that Jesus is saying when He clears the temple of the merchants. He is protesting what religion in His day had become, a way for people to make a buck rather than to honor the living God. It was a protest against going to the temple to sacrifice but not knowing why, just buying what you needed and offering it because it was the "right thing to do" without really getting to know the God the temple was for. It was protesting God becoming just another business transaction. He rejected the idea that throwing a bunch of money at your sins through sacrifices made you right with God. Jesus came so that we could know what it meant to be clean on the inside and have the desire for sin replaced with a desire for God. Jesus came so that we could be truly obedient. And for the sins we would commit, He came to be the sacrifice for us once and for all.

What Jesus did stirred up everyone. Some gathered around Him to hear His every word. Others looked to kill Him. There was no middle ground. By the end of the week, we read in Luke of a people divided...some shouted "crucify," and others followed Him to the end, mourning at His feet as He was nailed to a tree. Some had decided that Jesus was too dangerous to follow. The eleven remaining apostles abandoned Him at His darkest hour, realizing the risk was too great; it appears that only John was there when Christ hung on the cross. Others stayed the course with Him. As word of the resurrection spread, some changed their minds yet again.

The question for us is this: are we willing to follow Jesus Christ as He really was and is? Are we willing to cry out His name knowing who He is? The King entering His kingdom is easy to handle. The prophet clearing out the temple is not. The rabbi teaching great truths is easy to handle. The bloodied and battered Christ is not. Popular religion says be good. Jesus said "Be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Popular religion says following Christ is the doorway to getting everything else you want. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Popular religion wants to offend no one. Jesus said "Anyone who loves mother or father or son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37).

Jesus is not easy to follow. He asks more of us than we want to give. His teachings are harder than what we can achieve on our own. But Jesus promises us that if we take our yoke on us and learn from Him, our souls will find rest in Him (Matthew 11:29). We are assured in Hebrews 13:5, God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." In John 14, Jesus says, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth...if anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him...the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." Real truth, real joy, and real life come from following Him.

All of creation knows it. All of creation is waiting for the day when it will be restored. The rocks themselves are ready and waiting to cry out the news of God. Are we willing to look to the real Jesus, the one who loves us and cares for us, even when we don't understand Him, and sing His praises now and forevermore? The Bible calls the church the bride of Christ that is being prepared so we will be spotless before Him. Are we willing to get past the honeymoon phase of our Christian lives and love Christ even when our lives get difficult and it's tough to pray to Him? God wants us to be mature Christians who trust Him in all things. God has made us to be the ones who cry out His hosannas aloud, celebrating all that He is, all that He has done, all that He does, and all that He will do. Will we let the rocks do our job? Or will we praise Him today? Let's pray.