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Luke 2:8-14

Luke 19:28-40

GLORY AND PEACE

We are talking about entrances today. The people who were flowing into Jerusalem for the Passover observances had seen other processions coming into the city before. The Romans were quite good at putting on their military parades, where they dramatically showed their powerful ability to enforce their will over an occupied people. With legions of soldiers marching in formation dressed in their impressive military garb, brandishing their weapons, with officers riding stallions, with drums beating the cadence for all to march in step, it was an impressive show of potential force. Banners preceded them that decreed the rule of Tiberius Caesar, who proclaimed himself to be a god. At times, King Herod and the Governor Pontius Pilate would be in a chariot as part of the grand procession. These military parades proclaimed the powerful glory of the emperor that enforced the Pax Romana – a certain kind of glory and peace.

However, the Gospel of Luke tells us of a very different kind of procession. The Passover festival was just days away and people were streaming into Jerusalem for observances of it. Passover was a reminder of God's liberating power that had been displayed when the Hebrew people were freed from Egyptian slavery. It was a joyous occasion. Among the psalms people would sing as they were reaching their destination was the 118th Psalm, which includes this line: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." In the midst of this, Jesus makes an entrance. He does so riding not on a stallion like a king who commands a great military force. Rather, he rides on a colt of a donkey, a sign of a king who comes proclaiming quite a different sense of glory and peace.

Luke had told us of an earlier entrance Jesus had made – this one when he had entered the world just south of Jerusalem in Bethlehem. So you may have been wondering why, on this Palm Sunday, we had the reading from Luke chapter 2 about the night of Jesus’ birth. It would seem to be the wrong time for that part of the story. Each of the four gospels includes an account of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. All of them include a joyous expression by the crowd saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” But Luke is the only account where the crowd goes on to talk about the peace and glory that results from his coming. Now, do you remember what the angels had said in Luke 2? They declare the impact of the coming of a baby in Bethlehem, ending that proclamation with an expression about glory and peace. “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” the angelic host proclaims. “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” the multitude of disciples entering Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday proclaim. Glory and peace, peace and glory proclaimed upon these two entrances of the same person. The angels of heaven recognized at the beginning of Jesus’ life what these disciples came to know only at the end, namely, the reign of the Messiah brings prospects of God’s glory and peace.¹

However, this is a different kind of glory than we usually talk about in human affairs. This is not a parade down Broad Street, or Pennsylvania Avenue, or down a red carpet in Hollywood. In both situations, Jesus makes an entrance in humility. We notice that the angels make their joyous pronouncement not to the citizens of note in Bethlehem. They do not go to the mayor of the town or the commander of the Roman garrison assigned there. Rather, they go to bottom-of-economic-rung shepherds, who are told that the way they would recognize the baby was through the lowly condition of the place of his birth. This special baby had been placed not in a royal cradle, signifying the birth of a king. Instead, they would find him in an animal’s feeding trough.

In entering Jerusalem for the Passover observance, Jesus comes in on a donkey, not a stallion. Jesus does not seek glory for himself. He does not try to be raised up by stepping on others below him. Instead, he seeks to raise others up

to the liberation and good intent that the Lord desires for all of them. In terms of peace, what Jesus was bringing was in contrast to what Roman rulers offered. The Pax Romana they had established was a kind of peace that brutally put down any challenge to their display of power. Those on top imposed their will forcefully on others who were intimidated into a kind of shallow peace. In contrast, Pax Christi shows itself to reject violence as a means to an end. It begins with establishing peace with heaven's desires that enables a much deeper peace that would meet the needs of all people, not just those who were on top.

So what does that mean for us? How do we join in celebrating the kind of glory and peace that Jesus brings? Jesus still is making an entrance into where his presence is needed. We are not just playing with historic trivia from two millennia ago. There is a world that so very much needs the priorities, the love, the forgiveness that can lead to the kind of glory and peace that the very presence of God in our midst brings.

We also can't just play lip service to that divinely initiated glory and peace. Some have made the interpretation that the same crowd who celebrated Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday morphed into the mob that called for his crucifixion on Good Friday. There actually is scant evidence in the scriptural accounts to support such a conclusion. Rather, the crowd of disciples simply went quiet when things got challenging. Or in the confusion of the threatening situation, they hid themselves. As Presbyterians, we tend to not go out to make public demonstrations waving our palm branches and cheering for the Source of God's glory and peace. I'm not suggesting that is the way for us to be disciples of Jesus today. But we are called to publicly proclaim and to live out the love of Christ even for those who don't have everyone's best interests at heart. We are called to treat outsiders or strangers, refugees or immigrants, people of other religions or of no religion in the ways we would hope they would treat us if we were in their situation. It's called the golden rule. It's what we do as we follow the ruler whose ways set the gold standard of God's love.

That's the kind of glorious and peaceful living to which we are called. There are plenty who want to live with a different understanding of glory and peace. But as disciples of Jesus Christ, we want to see the true one who rules over all rule our lives in a way that brings glory to God and a deep and abiding peace to all on earth. When Jesus was born, the angels sang of it. On Palm Sunday, the multitude of disciples joined in joyfully declaring it. Going forward, we seek to proclaim and live into God's glory and peace, as made known to us by the One who was born in Bethlehem, by the One who rode on a donkey into Jerusalem, by the One who would die on a cross, by the One who would be raised from the dead to not only rule over us, but to rule over the powers of life and death itself. Whatever game of thrones we play, let us celebrate the entrance of Jesus into our lives. May all the earth know the peace heaven offers through the One whose glory extends all the way to heaven. Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹The thoughts shared here are based on what is expressed in Raymond Brown, The Birth of the Messiah, New York: Doubleday, 1993, p. 427.