

WHAT NEXT?
Luke 19: 28-40
Lenten Dinner & Worship Service
First Sunday of Lent – February 18, 2024
By Dean Feldmeyer

Every time a new leader steps into place those who are observing the transition have two questions that they are silently asking:

First, who are they? Who is this person? What's their background? What is their training? What do they want and what do they expect from me?

Once that question, the who-are-they question, then there's a second question: "What's next?"

How are they going to lead? Where's he going to take the church? What's she going to do?

It's the same with just about any newly installed leader.

First, we want to know who the person is. What's her name? Where's he from? What kind of personality does she have? What's his style?

New president. New mayor. New pastor. New school superintendent. New teacher. It's pretty much the same. First we ask and answer those questions. Then, when the preliminary stuff is answered we are all left with the same secondary question: ***What next?***

What's this new leader going to do?

No doubt, at the end of the little parade that was staged by Jesus in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, that's what his followers and the people who saw him ride into town were asking, too.

What next? What's he going to do now?

THE LUKE SETTING

This evening, we heard Luke's account of the story. There are, in fact, four rather different accounts, each of which is told from a different perspective and to a different audience.

Luke's gospel, as you will recall, is the first volume of a two-volume work called Luke-Acts.

The author, Luke, was a physician and a friend of Paul. He was, we believe, a leader of the Christian community in Antioch, Syria, around 70-80 C.E. and it was there that his account was written.

Roughly ten years earlier, between 60-65 C.E. the Zealots had led a revolt to drive the Romans out of Palestine. It had been successful for a while. They had cleared Jerusalem of Roman soldiers, burned the Roman barracks, there, and won a couple of opening battles.

But then Nero sent two generals and four legions, some roughly 10,000 battle hardened troops to put down the revolution. Attacking simultaneously from the north and west the Roman army cut a swath of death and destruction across Galilee and Judea.

The Roman Jewish historian, Josephus, says that the legions killed or enslaved every human being in their path, over a million men, women and children. Most contemporary historians think that number is an exaggeration but do allow that as many as 20,000 Jews died in the Romans' terrible retribution.

The Zealots fled to Jerusalem where they held out for a few months but the city eventually fell in 70 CE, was burned to the ground, the temple destroyed, and the zealots punished with mass crucifixions. About 1000 escaped and fled to the mountain fortress of Masada where they committed mass suicide just as the Romans breached the walls in 73 CE.¹

Jewish Christians were hated and, sometimes, executed by the Zealots because they were not sufficiently Zionist and almost universally pacifist in their in their politics. They were hated and sometimes executed by the Romans simply because they were Jews.

So, many of them fled the country as refugees to Egypt, Asia Minor and Syria. Most of those who went to Syria ended up in Antioch where they sought out their fellow Christians for succor and sanctuary.

To the gentile Christians of Antioch, these newcomers were a strange group with their Semitic traditions, their Jewish habits, their kosher rules and their strange languages and rituals. Integrating them into the Antiochian church would require much give and take, compromise, compassion, and flexibility.

So, Luke was writing to a church that was struggling with issues of hospitality and orthodoxy, how to live together in peace, respecting each other's traditions and customs and, at the same time, preserving their own unique expressions of the faith.

In the story of the first Palm Sunday, he paints an elaborate picture of the followers of Jesus brought together in a celebration without distinctions as to race, nationality or background.

LUKE'S VERSION OF THE STORY

We tend to think of the first Palm Sunday as a spontaneous celebration but that is true only in the Gospel of John. The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) tell a different story. The majority opinion seems to be that events of that morning were tightly planned.

In all three of the synoptic gospels the story opens with Jesus and his disciples camping on the Mount of Olives at the edge of the greater Jerusalem area. It is Passover, the city is full of visitors and a hotel room cannot be found for love or money, so many people are camping thus. On this particular morning, Jesus tells a couple of the disciples to go into the village of

¹ Some sources put the total number at 960. Others say that it was 960 rebels "and their families." Most contemporary sources agree that the total number of dead was 960.

Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem, where they will find, just inside the village, a young donkey, a colt tied there, waiting.

They are instructed to untie it and bring it out of the village to their camp site. And they are given a password to use in case someone tries to stop them. Just say, "The Lord has need of it," or words to that effect.

They go into the village and everything goes as planned, including the use of the password, and they get the donkey colt and bring it out to the camp site.

They create a makeshift saddle out of their cloaks and Jesus climbs aboard the little colt. Then they lead him up to the edge of the town and in through the gate as they lay their coats on the ground in front of him. Oddly, there is, in Luke, no mention of palms or any vegetation, for that matter. Matthew and Mark mention "leafy branches." John is the only one that mentions palms by name. But whatever they waved, they did so in what can only be described as a demonstration. It is a piece of absurdist street theater. It is guerilla street theater that satirizes a very popular Roman tradition called the *Triumphus Romanus* or Roman Triumph.

Here is how historian Anthony Miller describes the Roman Triumph in his book *The Roman Triumph and Modern English Culture*:

"The Roman Triumph, especially in the Republican era was the crowning achievement of a Roman General. The procession of the Roman army, allowed within the city gates for this special event, captured leaders and slaves, and any treasure looted on campaign, was a grand spectacle of enormous proportions.

"...the Triumph was an integral part of Roman culture, and one all-important purpose was to ask Jupiter to continue the prosperity of Rome.

"...the temples were all thrown open, garlands of flowers were prepared to decorate every shrine and image, and incense smoked on every altar. The Imperator [victorious general] ascended the triumphal car and entered a city gate, where he was met by the whole body of the Senate, headed by the magistrates."

Miller goes on to describe who was allowed to march in a triumph, in what order they marched and the route a triumph would follow through the city of Rome. It was all very stylized and organized according to custom and tradition. He closes the topic by adding a few words about the "Ovation" which was a smaller version of the Triumph.

"Additionally, the Ovation was a sort of smaller triumph. In this less grand affair, the commander entered the city on foot, or in later times on horseback. He was clothed in a purple-bordered robe. His head was crowned with laurel, and a sheep was sacrificed, instead of a bull as was the case of a triumph."²

Now, knowing that, we can get a better handle on what was going on in the village of Bethany on the morning of the first Palm Sunday.

² A Hollywood version of a Roman Triumph is featured in the movie "Ben Hur" and can be seen at the following web site on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4zGxi-7xDDw>

This little parade isn't just a parade. It's not meant as playful fun or a spontaneous celebration. **It's a demonstration aimed at satirizing and ridiculing the arrogance and presumption of the Roman Empire.** And satirizing the Roman Empire was considered treason, a crime punishable by death. And not just by death but by the most horrible death imaginable – crucifixion.

This little parade that our children so innocently re-enact every year at this time was an outright challenge to the ruling government of that time. It was a poke in the eye of Roman authority. It was treasonous. It was seditious and dangerous and daring. And the zealots, the armed revolutionaries in the crowd, were slaving at the potential this little demonstration represented.

And everyone – disciples, Zealots, Romans, curious passersby – were all asking themselves the same thing: What next?

Now what's he going to do? Now what direction is he going to take? What's next?

WHAT THE CROWD EXPECTED

Now, let us remember that the story is taking place just 25-30 years prior to the Jewish revolt of 60 CE but it is being told after that revolt. The revolt itself colors everything about this story.

The listeners in Luke's Antiochian church realize that hidden in the crowd, watching Jesus staging this dangerous demonstration are revolutionaries. Specifically, there are two groups: The Zealots and the Sicarii. The Zealots (from which we get the word zeal and zealous, meaning enthusiasm and enthusiastic) were armed insurrectionists. They were part of the local Jewish Palestinian militia. The Sicarii were a different group altogether. They would fall more under the rubric of terrorism.

They believed that Jewish freedom would come only at the point of a sword. They believed that loyal, patriotic Israeli Jews should kill Romans whenever they got a chance and help those that did. And they believed that any Jew who would not kill Romans and/or help those who did was a traitor who should be executed. And they did not shrink from executing other Jews who they considered to be collaborators or sympathizers.

Though they never really trusted or even liked each other very much, these two groups, the Zealots and the Sicarii would eventually band together in the revolution to throw off the yoke of Roman oppression.

As they watched and waved their palms what did they expect of Jesus? Did they see him as a revolutionary? Did they expect him to rally the people to arms? Did they hope that day that he would ride into Jerusalem and, in a blazing speech delivered on the steps to the temple call the masses to join their Zealot and Sicarii brothers in the struggle of armed resistance?

And what of the disciples? What did they expect?

He had told them time and again that he was going to Jerusalem not to lead a revolution but to die there. Did they get it yet? Did they understand that the revolution he was going to lead was a revolution of the mind and the heart? A revolution that required a shifting not of the political makeup of the government but of the theological minds and hearts of the people?

Did they understand that he was so dedicated to this revolution of the spirit that he was willing to die to make it happen?

Did they understand, did they have any notion of what would be required of them in the next seven days?

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

Having just stuck his thumb squarely in the eye of the Roman Empire and its representatives in Palestine, Jesus turns his critical gaze upon another power structure in the culture he lived in.

He climbs down off the donkey and marches straight to the temple where the money changers and souvenir hawkers have set up their stands on the porch, where greedy people are making money, getting rich and fat off of the worship of God.

Having just kicked dirt in the face of the civil authority, he will now do so to the religious authority.

And, again, the Zealots and the Sicarii clap their hands in glee. And again, the disciples wring their hands in fear and worry. And again, we want to stop reading because we know where this story is going. We know that Jesus is running downhill, out of control, a loose cannon. The disciples know that this cannot end well.

We know where the story is going.

We know what is next.

We've read this story every year for most of our lives. We know that there is only one way this story can end and, come Friday, we're not going to be shocked or surprised.

No, the shock and surprise, those don't come... till Sunday.

AMEN