

Grace and Judgment Both Surprise

Luke 19:1-10; 28-48

Of course, my three kids have flown away with the wind. Francis is in DC, Andrew in New York City, and Miriam is in Cleveland, finishing up college, Lord willing, this spring. But, while they were still here in Derby, our lives fairly revolved around them. You know how it is, soccer games, school events and eventually the high school band with the result that every Memorial Day we followed our kids in the marching band down Main Street to Orchard Avenue and into the cemetery there where my kids would play “Nearer My God to Thee” as part of the Memorial Day Ceremony.

Which came to mind as I read Luke’s account of the events on Palm Sunday, because one of the features of Palm Sunday in Luke’s gospel is that it is not enough to know where the parade ends, in Jerusalem. If we want understand what Luke wants us to learn from Palm Sunday, we’re going to need to note where the parade begins. Because for Luke the story of Palm Sunday is about Jesus leading a whirlwind campaign of conquest that begins way down in the Jordan River Valley in the border town of Jericho, right on the edge of the old Promised Land.

Which matters, as I have already noted, because Jericho was the place that God’s people first conquered, the first place in the Promised Land they could call their own. And the Israelites back then also were led by a man named Jesus more than a thousand years before our Jesus marched up from Jericho and then rode a donkey into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday. The name, Joshua, is Hebrew for Jesus, and old Joshua went through Jericho with an army of God’s people bringing judgment against God’s enemies, the Canaanites, again more than a thousand years before Christ.

But Joshua in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament were different in that old Joshua attacked Jericho with swords and spears, acting out God’s anger at the Canaanites for all the centuries they had done and been and celebrated what was wrong. So what old Joshua was sent to teach at Jericho is that there is a thing called judgment. That if we try to live as if there were no God, that if we want and take what isn’t ours, that if we lie and hate the truth and won’t respect God and won’t listen to what God says about life, then God himself will hold us to account and severely.

That is what old Joshua’s first visit to Jericho was about. So the city was destroyed, not one stone left on another, and the people there perished for their sins, all except for one! It turns out that there was a prostitute named Rahab, who when she encountered the spies old Joshua sent to scout out the city, Rahab believed the things she’d heard about Israel’s God and she decided to put herself and her family on the right side of history. So she helped God’s spies get safely back to Joshua and, that day, salvation came to her house in the form of a scarlet piece of yarn which told God’s soldiers to spare her even though she was Canaanite and everything about her was wrong.

So God loved her and saved her and spared her even though everything about Rahab was wrong except for her faith. Because when Joshua came calling, Rahab took to heart that God was right and Canaan was wrong and she threw in with God and Israel and gave up the life she knew and, believe it or not, Rahab eventually married into the tribe of Judah and became the great grandmother many times over of our Jesus from the first Palm Sunday. So it's sort of a surprise to read through Matthew's genealogy and find that one of the ancestors of our Lord Jesus was a Canaanite prostitute.

And I've already said that, when our Jesus marches through Jericho here in Luke's gospel, what he does is quite different than what old Joshua did a thousand years before. Because our Jesus is not on the attack. He comes to Jericho bringing grace, salvation, to anyone willing to see him for what he is and reach for him when he comes calling. So we read in Luke's gospel that, on his way to the city gates, Jesus healed a blind man who couldn't see a thing but, when he heard that Jesus had come calling, he knew in his heart that here was a king, the Son of David, and he had the boldness to yell for help even though all the good people, the disciples, the believers were tsk, tsking and shushing him. And the blind man's faith bought him his eyesight. Jesus healed him and told him "*...your faith has saved you.*"

And so now, with the ex-blind man in tow, Jesus' march through Jericho is even more about grace, more about the salvation we can have if we'll just believe Christ for who he is and reach for him when he comes calling. And caught up in all this excitement was a little man named Zacchaeus, who couldn't get a clear view of the parade route, first because he's short and second because he's so unpopular that no one in the crowd will move to make room for him.

Because Zacchaeus had betrayed his neighbors and signed up with the Romans to collect their taxes in an arrangement where the more he collects, the larger his share becomes. So Zacchaeus had become a rich man at his neighbor's expense. Finally, tired of staring at peoples' shoulder blades and unable to squeeze past their sharp elbows, Zacchaeus runs ahead on the route and climbs a tree to get a glimpse of the one rabbi he's heard of who actually made people happy.

But even so Zacchaeus was surprised when Jesus looked up at him and made him happy by treating him with a respect and a kindness that no tax collector ever got from his neighbors. Jesus knew his name, God knows how. And Jesus announced to everyone that Zacchaeus was the man with whom he wanted to spend the noon siesta. Which provoked another round of tsk, tsking from the good disciples.

But Zacchaeus was intoxicated by the hope that through this kind rabbi he could somehow get right with God. So Zacchaeus proposes a wild scheme where if he gives half of what he's worth to the poor and promises to make good four times over any shady schemes he's pulled that perhaps Jesus could do for Zacchaeus something like what he'd just done for the blind man he'd saved on the highway into town. And amazingly, Jesus buy into the scheme, allows the tax

collector salvation for 50% less than what he had demanded from the Rich Young Ruler just one chapter earlier here in Luke. One chapter and Jesus has gone down to half price! What's up with that?

David Lyle Jefferies noted in his commentary that the Rich Young Ruler in Luke 18 had asked Jesus "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" and he went away sad because what Jesus told him to do, sell everything he had, was just too much, it seemed beyond his reach. But the Tax Collector here in Jericho isn't calculating what to do, isn't trying to earn the grace that Jesus had already shown him. He senses that, in Jesus, God has come calling and he responds to the grace and forgiveness Jesus gave him with a change of heart, rearranging his finances and his relationships in a way that was generous and risky and he trusts God to sort it out.

"Salvation has come to this house today," Jesus said, *"since he too is a son of Abraham."* So what the blind beggar and the tax collector in Luke's gospel, and Rahab a thousand years before them, have in common is that all three responded in faith when God came calling. Rahab saw in Joshua's spies a chance to escape judgment and find grace so she took up with them. The beggar heard in the sounds on the highway that the king was near so he yelled for the Son of David to come to him. Zacchaeus saw in Jesus a sort of grace that only comes once so he turned his life and his finances upside to down get it and keep it. So they all found grace in Jericho of all places, because they all believed that God is good, and grace is there when God comes calling.

As Jesus put it, the point is that when God comes calling it is to *"...to seek and save the lost."* So he told a parable at Zacchaeus' house about grace and money. The Parable of the Ten Minas here in Luke 19 is identical to the Parable of the Ten Talents in Matthew 25 with two important differences. First of all, a mina was worth a lot less than a talent, so Jesus lowered the financial stakes here in Luke even though what happens with the money is identical otherwise. But the second difference is that here in Luke, the master lending the money is a king, about to go away on a long journey to receive his crown from a greater king far away. And entirely apart from who does what with money, Jesus introduced here in Luke the disturbing notion that the kingdom is divided and not everyone in the kingdom loves and trusts and wants this king in the first place.

Remember what the faithless servant said, who hid the money the master gave him in a handkerchief? "He's a hard man...", the faithless servant tells us, "you can't trust him to be kind and fair!" and so the faithless servant did nothing with what his master gave him. And the point is that being a good steward is as much about loving and trusting the master as it is about being good with money. How we respond when the king comes calling, what we do with the grace he gives us tells the story of whether we love and trust and want the king. And the irony of that first Palm Sunday is that sinners and outcasts from Jericho loved and wanted and trusted the king while in Jerusalem, the good people, who imagined themselves believers did not.

Having conquered Jericho and surprised the outcasts there with grace and salvation, Jesus next leads his entourage up the steep incline where his disciples find the royal donkey God had set in place for the king. And from there he mounts up and rides toward the holy city just as Israel's

kings had always done in the centuries before the Babylonians and Persians and Romans had taken their kings away. It was a flashback to the days of Solomon, complete with colorful garments, and bright music and palms waving in the air. And there was grumbling, the good people, tsk, tsking at a carpenter from Galilee playacting as a king.

As usual, the good people object to God doing anything that's a surprise. They want a God who's tame. They want a God they can manage. Like the Rich Young Ruler, they want a salvation they can earn for a reasonable amount of zeal and discipline. What they don't want is the wildness and unpredictability that comes into play when grace is on offer and judgment is also on the table. The problem being that when God comes calling, none of us are the good people we imagine ourselves to be. All of us need grace and all of us are liable to judgment should we fail to want grace.

So, in Luke's Palm Sunday, right at the end of his coronation parade, Jesus does the oddest thing. He sits right down at the city gate and begins to cry. Because everybody else is seeing palms and colorful cloaks on the highway and hearing songs about royalty and salvation, but what Jesus sees with the eye of a prophet is the holy city, looking like old Jericho, all smoke and rubble, not one stone left on another, her time run out, because she didn't want grace when God came calling.

His next stop was the temple market, where he surprises all the good people with a gesture of judgment. He fairly rips the place apart as if to warn the people in charge there that the God they pretend to worship isn't nearly as tame and manageable as they want him to be. The point being that the real God, the true God, is always a surprise. He is surprising at what he'll forgive, surprising in the company he wants to keep. All of us need grace, and none of us is so far lost, in so deep that we couldn't find it if we could only hear God come calling.

And God is surprising in that he won't be tamed, can't be managed, not by the most industrious religiosity, not by the best upbringing and pedigree. He won't be bought by anything we can afford to give him. That's what the Rich Young Ruler learned to his sorrow. What God commands, what he wants is for us to love and want and trust him, however intimidating and difficult we might find him to be at first glance. Love him, want him, trust him and there's nothing good he won't give us.

And when might he come calling? I think the answer is right now. I think that no one ever enters a church by accident. I think that our eyes can be opened, our lives can be turned upside down by grace any time we draw near God for worship, any time we hear his word and take to heart the possibilities. But it's an easy thing to miss. It's an easy thing to have God come calling, but all you see is a carpenter on an ass. Today could be the day any one of us takes a step toward God. The envelopes are in your bulletins. The devotionals are on the table. The Spirit of Jesus is in the room. But whether we open our hearts, whether we give a thing, whether we love and trust and want to know God either happens in our hearts...or not.