

“A Song to Sing”
Palm Passion Sunday
Spiritual Practice: Singing Our Lives
Rev. Michele Ward
April 14, 2019
Luke 19:28-40

When we walk up to the entrance of Jerusalem this morning, Jesus has just finished telling a parable about when to expect the kingdom of heaven to arrive to a crowd on his way to Jerusalem before we pick up in the chapter. He tells them this parable because people thought the kingdom of heaven was going to appear immediately when they arrived in Jerusalem. In this parable of the pounds, the central questions are about loyalty, obedience, and what to do when the master is away. This is not a reassuring parable to those anxiously awaiting a newly minted kingdom of heaven.¹ It is right after this exchange that we enter the text in verse 28:

“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

¹ *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on NRSV- Year C*, pg. 24.

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."

Leader: *Listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Church.*

People: Thanks be to God.

The story of Jesus and his followers is a story written for and by people who experienced both privilege and oppression. The story of the triumphal entry is full of joyful singing and excitement, and it is full of insurrection. This crowd of disciples calling out to Jesus were committing treason by shouting that Jesus was a king. The people that cry out for Jesus, for this hoped-for Messiah, were colonized, brown bodies in Ancient Rome. We, as the inheritors of the church structured as it is today, say these words in another way. We say these words, and yet they were not written for or by us. At the same time, we are the keepers of this story--and to be the keepers of this story means to name our relationship with a text written for and by an oppressed people as a Christian tradition that aligned itself with the power of the Empire. This triumphal entry might sound like a parade with Jesus showing off his prophetic skills. But there is more to this narrative than that. It is a story of hard-won hope, a story of a determined Jesus, a story of a song to sing.

As a way to acknowledge the tension between the context of this narrative and our current time and place, I want to the Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray, saint, priest, writer, activist, and lawyer, wrote poetry to express the tension she experienced between hope and despair:

“Hope is a crushed stalk between clenched fingers
Hope is a bird’s wing broken by a stone.
Hope is a word in a tuneless ditty...
Hope is a song in a weary throat.”²

² The Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray, “Dark Testament,” excerpts from verse 8.

Rev. Dr. Murray wrote, in part, to express the fatigue and longing that comes with working on the changes that twentieth century America needed and still need around racism, misogyny, and discrimination. She wrote this poem because she wasn't seeing change happen as quickly or as widely as the world needed. Can you hear that hopeful song sung by weary throats around you, too? Are you singing one yourself?

Our spiritual practice this week is singing, and I'm not only talking about songs of joy. Songs come to us in all kinds of forms - songs of praise, songs of lament, songs of love, songs of protest. As I read through this passage, imbued with the hopefulness of Jesus entering Jerusalem, Murray's words echoed through my mind. I began to ask myself, what would be different about these Hosannas if they were sung in throats weary with their own oppression? These Hosannas are fully human, hopeful and tired at the same time.

Scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan remind us in their book *The Last Week* that two processions took place at the beginning of Holy Week in Jerusalem.³ Pilate came from one side of the city, his entrance full of pomp and circumstance: chariots, horses, armor. Pilate was not in Jerusalem on accident the week of Jesus' crucifixion. He was there because of fear and power. The Jewish holiday, Passover, was a celebration of God's covenant with Israel and God's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery into freedom. Rome, concerned about a possible uprising in the city because of the nature of the holiday, sent Pilate to remind the people that God was not coming to rescue them this time. Rome was in charge, and would not let anything like what happened in Egypt take place under their watch.

Jesus enters from the other side of the city, with much less pomp and circumstance. He does not have chariots, or war horses, or flowing robes of expensive fabric or armor. Instead he rides a young colt in his everyday clothes, throngs of his followers calling out to him. They throw down their cloaks and

³ Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 1-5.

shout out, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” Jesus was not the kind of king that walks into King’s Landing to usurp the Iron Throne. He is the kind of leader, who tells his people a parable about the kingdom that is coming--the kind of kingdom that is not a place, but is a movement of people. The kind of kingdom that is not a destination, but is a way of being.

It is this kind of kingdom that Jesus enters Jerusalem declaring on a young colt this morning. We hear the cheers of the expectant crowd, and we also hear the weariness in their Hosannas, crying out to Jesus to be their king. They are tired of Roman rule. They are tired of Roman rule. They are ready for the kingdom to come with a new leader, the one that they have been waiting to arrive and dismantle the corrupt and oppressive government of Judea.

What many of them do not realize, which we as listeners in the present know, is that Jesus is heading towards his death. The crowds cheering and celebrating his arrival will soon turn into the bystanders that look on while he dies, and the oppressors will remain victorious rulers over Jerusalem. The irony of calling this day “The Triumphal Entry” begs for our attention, reminding us that the sorrow of Jesus’ coming death and the persistence of the resurrection live side-by-side. How triumphant is this arrival if Jesus is going to die? That doesn’t sound very victorious. Honestly, it makes Jesus sound like the last person anyone should be praising and following that day.

But the people still shout in protest, praising Jesus. The song they offer to Jesus is full of hope, full of promise, full of weariness. They have been singing this song for centuries. They have waited for a king to come, one unlike any king they have had before, and they are beyond ready for a new reality to set in. They are ready for a new day to come. The kingdom that they think Jesus brings is not the perfect Jerusalem. Jesus does not come and transform the city, although he could. Instead, he journeys through the city, bringing the kingdom of heaven wherever he goes. Jesus, and those who follow him, are the kingdom. It is a way of life, not a power structure.

Holding on to hope that change is truly coming takes emotional work and action. It is the kind of emotional work that the Irish band U2 expresses in their song “Sunday Bloody Sunday,” written in response to the violence in Ireland due to The Troubles, the civil war in Ireland during the second half of the 20th century. U2 sings, *“I can't believe the news today/Oh, I can't close my eyes/And make it go away/How long?/How long must we sing this song?/How long, how long?”*

How long, Baltimore? How long must we sing this song, this one full of a longing for integrity and justice, for basic human rights such as access to quality education and clean water? We Baltimoreans are still singing this song--this song of waiting, this song of choosing hope when others around us say there is none left. We sing the way that the citizens of Jerusalem and the crowds of disciples did that Palm Sunday long ago when Jesus rode into town on a young colt and changed everything. He acknowledged the need for their song, so much so that he said that if the people did not sing and shout for change, the very stones of the city would cry out. Creation itself cries out for change, Paul tells us, the earth groaning like a woman in childbirth. In Baltimore, if we do not cry out for change, the sidewalks in our neighborhoods, the bricks in our rowhomes, the limestone blocks of our churches will shout out, full of hope in their weary throats.

What is your song? What are you singing about in your life? What is the change you want to see that stirs you up? Sing your song, no matter how tired your throat might be--because hope is coming on the back of a donkey riding into town, and the sidewalks are shouting that Jesus will turn the world upside down.