



PALM SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, March 16, 2008

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Lection – Zechariah 9:9-13 and Luke 19:28-40 (New Revised Standard Version)

Zechariah 9:9-13

(v. 9) Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

(v. 10) He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the warhorse from Jerusalem;
and the battle-bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

(v. 11) As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you,
I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.

(v. 12) Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;
today I declare that I will restore to you double.

(v. 13) For I have bent Judah as my bow;
I have made Ephraim its arrow.

I will arouse your sons, O Zion,
against your sons, O Greece,
and wield you like a warrior's sword.

Luke 19:28-40

(v. 28) After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

(v. 29) When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, (v. 30) 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. (v. 31) If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" just say this: "The Lord needs it."' (v. 32) So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. (v. 33) As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, 'Why are you untying the colt?' (v. 34) They said, 'The Lord needs it.' (v. 35) Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. (v. 36) As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. (v. 37) 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, (v. 38) saying, 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!' (v. 39) Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop.' (v. 40) He answered, 'I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.'

I. Description of Liturgical Moment

Palm Sunday is one of the highest Sundays of the year, commemorating Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The moment is full of exultation for the congregation as they celebrate God's power with great expectation. In Jesus' day, people were literally expecting the heavens to open such that the kingdom of heaven would touch the earth. Because King Jesus was passing by, the excited onlookers spread their cloaks and tree branches on the road. In like manner, one may find African American congregations waving palm branches on this festive day, as they sing "Ride on King Jesus."

Because we know the end of the story, the temptation is to rush to the cross of Calvary then to the empty garden tomb. But, one must linger over the potential of this day for it is crucial. It is a time when people realized in great numbers who Jesus really was and a time when people had to deal with unmet expectations. Instead of a crown, Jesus found a cross; but this unexpected pitfall could in no way diminish the victory that was at hand. Thus, this is an occasion both to celebrate Jesus as King, and to acknowledge our uncertainty about how this kingship will be manifest in our lives.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Zechariah 9:9-13 and Luke 19:28-40

Part One: Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

For the first four or so years of my ministry, God seemed to ordain that I preach on Palm Sunday. It has always been for me a joyous celebration, pregnant with potential for God's in-breaking power to emerge in a new way in the world. Next to Easter, I enjoy no occasion more, even though I realize that the jubilation of palm branches will suddenly shift its focus to the jagged edges of an old-rugged cross. This contrast, in my estimation, can only be fully understood by fully living into the celebration before mourning races in and settles in upon us.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The Gospel of Luke portrays this time in Jesus' life as a time of great expectation and exultation. The people were obviously weary of the Roman occupation. They had been hearing rumors of a great teacher from Nazareth who healed the sick, fed the hungry, and made the scriptures come alive. Some of them had seen miracles first hand and had heard parables straight from Jesus' mouth. Now, they had a deliverer; their long awaited Messiah and Savior, King Jesus, was with them.

Expectation, exuberation, and exultation filled the air; this was the scene for the victory celebration of "Palm Sunday." The people were expecting change, a major change, a change never seen before in their world. God was going to do something special in their time. God was about to transform their daily world of trouble into a perfect, holy, just city of grace—a New Jerusalem, a paradise where God's will was done by everyone. Our African ancestors might have described it as a place where "everyday was Sunday and howdy and never goodbye." And most importantly, standing in their midst was the Messiah, King Jesus, himself.

It should not be hard for us to understand their sense of joy because we live in a world where we as a people have been oppressed, abused, treated unjustly, and denied opportunities just because of our ethnic heritage. We can understand their joy because we have seen people that look like us brutally beaten for no apparent reason. Because we can understand their pain due to the iron hand of Roman oppression, it is not hard for us to imagine what it felt like when the word got out that the Savior is coming, our troubles are ceasing, and the Kingdom of God is arriving! There is not much that is mightier than the belief that a better day has come.

As Jesus rode into town on a colt, he brought to mind the image in Zechariah 9:9 of the promised king humbly riding on a colt. The people recognized this image and knew that this man was the king whom they had been looking for. They were rejoicing, celebrating the goodness of God who had given them their new king. In their great joy, Luke describes the people casting their cloaks on the ground making a path for the Lord; and John, who

provides the name for this occasion, speaks of people waving palms of praise in the air. It is this joyous arrival that we celebrate today on Palm Sunday.

The people gave their all in joy to pave the way for the coming of the Kingdom. Imagine the type of commitment and the excitement it takes to remove your clothes from your body and cast them in the street. Some of these people were poor and may only have owned one cloak, yet they cast them on the ground so that their new king would have a royal pathway on which to walk. What would this world be like if we were so excited about our relationship with God that we committed all of our time, talent, and treasure to spreading the Gospel, to feeding the inner city poor, to visiting and praying for the sick and shut-in, to comforting the discouraged who struggle with drug abuse and other addictions, to seeking justice for those treated unjustly by the prison system, and to sharing hope with hopeless young men and women? This Palm Sunday type of commitment would be a “casting off of our clothes” in order to welcome King Jesus who wants to walk and talk in the streets of our communities. “Casting off” would replace our usual complaining about all that is wrong with the world. So I ask how would the world change if, because of our joy in Christ, we gave our all to God and others? Could it pave the way for the coming of the Kingdom of God?

The cloak-removing folk in Luke had experienced the coming king and they could not keep quiet. They could not keep it to themselves! In front of their friends, family, coworkers, and even the leaders of their world, they proclaimed that they had found in Christ what they had waited for all of their lives. Such willingness to testify that God has done something amazing for us is a witness to the world, to those who do not know that “there’s not a friend like the lowly Jesus.” King Jesus had done something in their lives and that was reason enough for them to say something! How about you?

Celebration

Because of Christ, there is a pregnant possibility that we will be victorious over the powers and principalities that have oppressed and abused us. We have hope because our God is in this house! Our God is with us! That’s reason enough to celebrate, to sing God’s praise, to tell somebody.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: The images of thronging celebrants; Jesus entering the city on a colt; the large palms that were waved; the cloaks of all types being thrown to clear a dry path for the Savior; the Mount of Olives;

Sounds: The loud voice of the crowd praising God; the voices of the Pharisees asking the crowd to stop making noise/celebrating; and

Textures: The texture of the skin of the colt; the smooth texture of the palms; the feel of the varieties of fabric of the cloaks that were thrown on the ground.