

“Sorting through the Tensions of This Day”

Luke 19:28-40

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We never know exactly how we should feel in our family in the middle of March. My mother died far too young on March 13, but Ian was born five years later on March 14. Dana’s uncles were born on March 10 and 12, but her grandfather died on March 13 and was buried on March 15. Her father was born on March 25. “Beware the Ides of March,” Julius Caesar is told in the Shakespeare play, but we feel like all of March is dangerous, though also potentially magnificent.

So, should we feel happy or sad or just confused? And this doesn’t even take into account the emotions stirred by the holy round ball in March. March Madness - indeed! We’ve all experienced a mixture of emotions, all of us except the Cavaliers among us, the Wahoos, who are just joyful, disgustingly joyful. The rest of us – Devils, Tar Heels, Wolfpack, Wildcats, Tigers, Volunteers and Wolverines – are a mixed-up mess of emotional confusion, even though it is April now.

This is a bit how we feel on this day in the Christian year, the day we recognize as Palm Sunday. Part of us feels like we ought to celebrate, as Jesus enters Jerusalem to a hero’s welcome. “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” But there is an ominous feeling in our gut, the music is about to switch to a minor key, Jesus is on his way to death. Maybe we should restrain ourselves. Some Pharisees seem to agree. They want Jesus to order his disciples to stop.

Yet Jesus tells them that even if they stop, the stones will not be silent. So, perhaps joy is called for here. But just after our reading ends, Jesus offers a lament for Jerusalem, just as he did several chapters earlier (Luke 13:34-35); he weeps for the city. We begin to feel a bit like Tevye in “Fiddler on the Roof.” On the one hand, there is cause for joy... but on the other, the boy’s going to die... It is difficult to know how to feel. What are we supposed to make of this day?

For one thing, it offers a reflection of where we live most of our lives. We live in in-between times, in between the First Advent and the Second, in between the inauguration of God's realm and its completion, in between the already and the not-yet. We have the assurance of hope for eternity - Jesus' resurrection makes this clear - but there is unfinished business in the present day. There is work to do. There is suffering and evil all around us because not all things are yet subject to Christ's reign.

We see this in our experience with illness and grief, failure and disappointment. But we also see it in the suffering of this world – the millions who still starve, live with violence and oppression, or are forced to leave their homeland; the fear and hatred of the other that persists, whether it is based on race, religion, ideology or anything else; the way we continue to abuse the planet that has been entrusted to our care by its Creator and ours. Jesus has launched God's realm and envisioned the beloved community, and one day the vision will be fulfilled, but we are not there yet, it is still a work-in-progress, we are still a work-in-progress. Thus, we experience a range of emotions.

A young boy in another setting provided a concise illustration of human nature and thus human experience. He always had a twinkle in his eye which signaled the potential for mischief. This morning he had agreed to hold the Bible for the pledge during Vacation Bible School which lets you know this was a long time ago. As we rehearsed the pledges, he looked downright angelic. He held the Bible reverently. It was something to see. But immediately after we finished rehearsing, he looked at his buddy and said, "Hey, you wanna' go see a dead bird?" "Yea!" said the friend, "Let's go!" and off they went.

From the sacred to the profane in a nanosecond – that's the ten-year-old boy... and girl... and the fifty-year-old man and woman, just in different ways. We are all a mixed-up mess of realities and thus life is a mixed-up mess. So, the fact that scripture often presents life as a complex mixture of realities is helpful, as is the fact that today's story creates complicated tensions. It is where we live most days.

But as we sort through the tensions of this day, we also find permission to experience different emotions, including difficult

emotions like sadness and fear. The fact that we feel a tightness in our gut as Jesus enters Jerusalem does mean that we lack intelligence or faith. He is headed to suffering and death and even though these experiences will not have the final word, the realities of the cross are brutal and not to be minimized.

Even the Pharisees weigh in on this. Just as some Pharisees warn Jesus in Luke 13 that Herod wants to kill him, some Pharisees in the Jerusalem crowd want Jesus to silence the crowd. We might assume they are jealous of the attention he is receiving or perhaps at most are concerned about the fallout for all Jewish people, including them, if the Romans view all the excitement as a political uprising. The crowd does shout, “Blessed is the *king* who comes in the name of the Lord!”

But not all Pharisees are opposed to Jesus. They are reformers of the law like him. They seek spiritual renewal like him. Their motivation here might well include some genuine concern for Jesus. He needs to quiet the crowd before the beast of Rome is awakened. And they are not crazy. Their fear is justified.

And as we have noted already, right after our reading today ends, Jesus weeps over the city. He realizes that not only will he suffer, but the whole of Jerusalem will suffer. The people will be crushed as will their temple. Perhaps he is referring to the Jewish revolt of 66-70 CE which will end in tragic failure.

So, even on this great day for the Jesus movement, and even for the faithful, it is appropriate that feelings of fear and sadness are part of the equation. This may seem obvious to some, but I cannot tell you how many times I have heard well-meaning people argue that the faithful simply do not have these emotions.

“We can’t be sad; he’s with Jesus now!” I’ve heard people tell a grieving widow. “We have nothing to fear; the power in us is greater than the power that is in the world!” others claim, quoting scripture, even to a parent of an adult child who is headed to a combat zone. I remember vividly the word of critique spoken to me in another setting when I walked across the church parking lot drained of all emotion just after having led a funeral service for the father of two young children. “Where is your smile?” the person said. Really?!

We feel what we feel in the difficult places of life, no matter what we believe about God and eternity, and thus fear and sadness are part of human experience. They are a part of this day when Jesus enters Jerusalem to a hero's welcome. Those who have these feelings have not lost their minds or their faith. They understand what is happening.

So, the tension of this day reflects our experience and it gives us permission to feel how we feel. And then, it creates space for us to celebrate even in the midst of our struggles. After all the back and forth about his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus says that even if his disciples were quiet, the stones would shout out! It is a day filled with joy that cannot be denied because even though there is still work to do, even though the suffering of the cross lies ahead, this story will end on a victorious note. Jesus will be raised, and not only that, even his death will bring cause for celebration, as it brings salvation for the world.

So, it is "O.K." to celebrate even though we live in in-between times. It is "O.K." to celebrate even before we get to the place where there is no more suffering and death, where there is no more hatred and hostility. For if we must wait until that day arrives, we will never know any joy in this life because it always ends in death and there are always struggles on the horizon – struggles with health, relationships, vocation and identity. They are all part of life.

And to be clear, to say that we can celebrate does not mean that we dismiss those who are sad and afraid. Nor does it mean that we are free to lose our focus on the Christian journey. To return to March Madness for a brief yet painful moment, there are players, usually freshmen, who get so excited about how things are going early on in a game that they lose their focus and end up losing, at least in part, because of their immaturity, their premature celebration.

We must be sensitive to those who are weighed down with the burdens of this life and diligent about the works of love and justice that come with following Jesus, but it is "O.K." to allow the reality of our future hope to creep into the present and bring us joy.

In his book *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling* my pastoral care professor Andy Lester wrote about the power of future stories to

shape present-day life. What we believe about the weather forecast shapes the plans we make. What we believe about the future of the economy affects the manner in which we invest. Our beliefs about the future affect the present. In the stories of resurrection, we have the greatest future stories of all. How can they not affect the way we live today? How can we not celebrate our hope even in the midst of despair?

That's what Jesus means when he says the stones will shout. He will not be deterred from his mission. He will accomplish all God has planned. He will not only rise from the dead to give us hope for eternal life; he will die in a way that brings us salvation, companionship in suffering and a model for self-giving love. Thus, how can we not celebrate this good news, even in this in-between time?

A couple of Sundays ago, the Evening Bells played an offertory entitled "How Can I Keep from Singing?" Pete Seeger popularized the song in the 1960s with a slightly altered text, but the original text was written by American Baptist minister Robert Wadsworth Lowry and was first published on August 7, 1868. It read like this.

My life flows on in endless song;
Above earth's lamentation,
I hear the sweet, tho' far-off hymn
That hails a new creation.

Thro' all the tumult and the strife
I hear the music ringing;
It finds an echo in my soul—
How can I keep from singing?

What tho' my joys and comforts die?
The Lord my Saviour liveth;
What tho' the darkness gather round?
Songs in the night he giveth.

No storm can shake my inmost calm

While to that refuge clinging;
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth,
How can I keep from singing?

I lift my eyes; the cloud grows thin;
I see the blue above it;
And day by day this pathway smooths,
Since first I learned to love it.

The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart,
A fountain ever springing;
All things are mine since I am his—
How can I keep from singing?

Then, in 1950, Doris Plenn added this verse.

When tyrants tremble in their fear
And hear their death knell ringing,
When friends rejoice both far and near
How can I keep from singing?

In prison cell and dungeon vile
Our thoughts to them are winging,
When friends by shame are undefiled
How can I keep from singing?

Indeed! How can we keep from singing when we hear the far-off hymn of a new creation, when we know that Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, when we learn that tyrants will fall and prisoners will be set free? This is the good news of this day and the Gospel as a whole. Life brings a complicated mixture of experiences. So, it is “O.K.” to feel how we feel, even sad and afraid. But in the end goodness will prevail, love will prevail, God will prevail! So, let the people sing, let the stones shout. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the one who lays down life for us and then is raised to give us hope!