

April 14, Palm Sunday C (Luke 19:28-40)

Part of me thinks Palm Sunday worship is all too much—too loud, too celebratory.

by [Ron Adams](#) in the [March 27, 2019](#) issue

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Our Gospel reading for Palm Sunday begins like an espionage novel. Jesus draws two of his followers aside. He gives them a mission. “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.’” The two disciples go and find the colt. The question is asked, and the password is given. The Lord needs it.

It’s an odd beginning to an odd story. There’s the suggestion of secrecy and premeditation. Arrangements are made and plans formulated, and in the end the transfer goes off without a hitch. It’s like a Cold War story of a Berlin Wall encounter in that fraught space between freedom and captivity.

In the next scene, Jesus moves from being the orchestrator of events to someone literally going along for the ride. The disciples bring the colt and “set Jesus on it,” which could mean anything from giving him a boost to physically placing him there. The energy is now coming from those surrounding Jesus. They are the instigators. The people throw their cloaks on the ground before Jesus as he starts the ride down the mountain. They sing praises to God “for all the deeds of power that they had seen.”

The story ends with Jesus in conversation with some Pharisees, who ask him to make his disciples settle down. Luke does not tell us why they do this. Perhaps they disapprove of the disciples’ behavior. With so many tourists in Jerusalem for Passover, they may be wary of a potential disturbance. Maybe they are genuinely concerned for Jesus’ safety. Whatever their intentions, Jesus’ answer is this: “If these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

I confess that I don't know what to make of this story. Nor do I know what to make of our typical Christian observance of Palm Sunday.

We purchase palm branches and hand them out to our children. Then we have them march around the sanctuary waving their branches and singing, *Hosanna!* They struggle to stay in line and to shout that unfamiliar word and to march and wave simultaneously. It's a heartwarming scene and an opportunity to invite our children to actively participate in worship. But a heavy cloud of doom trails them around the sanctuary. Their shouts of praise are heartfelt; there is no guile in their steps, nothing cynical in the waving of their branches. Yet we know what will happen soon. We know what it means for Jesus to set his face to enter Jerusalem for the last time. There is a dissonance inherent in our observance. Our children cheer as Jesus rides to the city that will soon kill him.

Part of me agrees with the Pharisees who try to stop this cheering. Part of me wants to say, Let's tone it down a little. Can't you see where this is leading? Don't you know what is waiting in Jerusalem? This is a funeral procession, not a parade. Put the palm branches away. Use your inside voices.

Then I remember. "If these were silent, the stones would shout out." Jesus' words challenge me to take another look—to reconsider the scene, to turn my eyes from what I know lies waiting up ahead and instead focus my full attention on the one astride the colt. Jesus' words challenge me to recall his many deeds of power and to offer praises to the God who sent him into the world. To recognize Jesus for who he is and join in singing, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

We'll tell the story of Palm Sunday again this year. We'll shiver as we watch those two intrepid disciples make their rendezvous with the owner of the colt. We'll relax once we've witnessed the sign and the countersign. We'll laugh as some joyful rowdies hoist Jesus onto the colt's back. We'll give our children palm branches and invite them to march and shout and sing and join the crowd walking with Jesus toward Jerusalem. And, yes, we'll be aware of that cloud following our dancing children. It'll be right there in front of us and unavoidable. But once again we will refuse to let it dampen the children's enthusiasm for this opportunity to show us adults how praise is really done.

We do all this not as an act of denial of what comes next but as an act of obedience and worship. The part of me that thinks it's all too much—too loud, too

celebratory—will be asked to take a seat. If I don't sing, the stones will shout out. So I may as well sing. We may as well sing praises to God and to the Christ whose deeds of power have been seen by us.

The Palm Sunday story calls us into an in-between space—into the fraught space between freedom and captivity, companionship and betrayal, outrageous joy and unspeakable sorrow, life and death. Somewhere between Bethany and Jerusalem a parade is forming that also, in a certain light, looks like a funeral cortège. We know what is coming, but we are not there yet. We are in between and we are asked to sing. It is uncomfortable, singing even as we weep. But it is the way of discipleship.