

The Reading of Luke 19:38

*“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”*

Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

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

²⁹When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰saying, “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. ³¹If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” ³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ³⁴They said, “The Lord needs it.” ³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷As 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, ³⁸saying,

“Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!”

³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” ⁴⁰He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

The Reading of Luke 22:67

“If you are the Messiah, tell us.” Are you then the Son of God?

The Mocking and Beating of Jesus

⁶³Now the men who were holding Jesus began to mock him and beat him; ⁶⁴they also blindfolded him and kept asking him, “Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?” ⁶⁵They kept heaping many other insults on him.

Jesus before the Council

⁶⁶When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, gathered together, and they brought him to their council. ⁶⁷They said, “If you are the Messiah, ⁶⁸tell us.” He replied, “If I tell you, you will not believe; ⁶⁸and if I question you, you will not answer. ⁶⁹But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.” ⁷⁰All of them asked, “Are you, then, the Son of God?” He said to them, “You say that I am.” ⁷¹Then they said, “What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!”

The Reading of Luke 23:3

“Are you the King of the Jews?”

Jesus before Pilate

23 Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus^[a] before Pilate. ²They began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.”^[b] ³Then Pilate asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” He answered, “You say so.” ⁴Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no basis for an accusation against this man.” ⁵But they were insistent and said, “He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.”

The Reading of Luke 23:22

“What evil has he done?”

Jesus Sentenced to Death

¹³Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, ¹⁴and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. ¹⁵Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. ¹⁶I will therefore have him flogged and release him.”^[d]

¹⁸Then they all shouted out together, “Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!” ¹⁹(This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) ²⁰Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; ²¹but they kept shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!” ²²A third time he said to them, “Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.” ²³But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. ²⁴So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. ²⁵He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

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The Reading of Luke 19:38

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

The story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem begins with a parade and a declaration. The familiar Palm Sunday story has Jesus coming into the city, descending from the Mount of Olives. Not knowing, or perhaps not remembering much about my Jerusalem geography, I wanted to get a picture for myself of where this was, and what was there during Jesus’ time. Turns out that it was not only a significant grove of olive trees on a hill overlooking Jerusalem, but it is now and was even then the location of a prominent Jewish cemetery, presumed to be the resting place of prophets. It’s interesting to note that Luke describes Jesus ascension as happening after he has led the disciples “as far as Bethany” once again traveling through the Mount of Olives. So, both death and resurrection, despair and hope, reside together on that hillside. Jesus will pray there in the Garden of the olive oil press – Gethsemane. And Bethany is right there, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, on the same mountain, and it is in that place where Jesus has already been anointed for his burial by Mary in her own living room.

Though we cannot identify clearly what path this parade took from scriptural sources, this year, I envision Jesus' colt having to navigate around the tombstones of his ancestors. The foreshadowing is obvious. Jesus is riding into Jerusalem for a confrontation. But the crowds who have gathered to watch are still wanting that confrontation to be one of success, one of victory. One of those dead prophets, Zechariah, had already prophesied a nightmarish battle on the day of the Lord, when a major reckoning would happen with the Lord's feet planted firmly on either side of the Mount of Olives. The imagery and symbolism that Luke is offering through his narrative and what Jesus was offering with his makeshift parade are full of what people would find familiar and, at the same time, full of contrasts.

Silence and shouting. A parade of triumph, on a donkey that is too young to really ride. Olive trees and tombs. Ultimate peace, under the shadow of the Lord's impending judgment as crowds offer their prayer and praise, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" It looks like a win. It seems as though the king has been crowned. And the reign of glory is about to begin... but wait.

In the meantime, once they get to Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples begin to make preparations for Passover. They need a place to eat and pray in the city. The crowds are still pretty fired up about the parade they saw, and they are eager for something to happen, something that will show them the truth and give them assurance that the Messiah has come and a new day, the Lord's day is dawning. But we also know that didn't make everyone happy. And though they once declared with enthusiasm and gusto: "Blessed is the King..." Now that kingdom is about to be questioned.

The Reading of Luke 22:67 (Read the passage)

“If you are the Messiah, tell us. Are you the Son of God?”

If you are the Messiah – tell us. Are you the Son of God? With a little help from Judas fueling the fight, the crowd has definitely shifted. The ones who KNEW Jesus was blessed now want more proof. Though he was blindfolded, they expected him to know who had been hitting him. “Prophecy” they say. Do the tricks for us. Make the show about us. Jesus doesn’t.

At daybreak, the assembly of the elders and the people haul Jesus in for judgment. Tell us the truth Jesus. The important people in charge threaten him. If you are the Messiah, just say so. But Jesus knows that he’s already damned either way. You can’t just answer – yes, of course. That’s blasphemy. And if he says, no I’m not, then he’s also asking to be executed as a fraud. His answer is ambiguous. “From now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.” They presume this is his answer.

“Are you the Son of God?” they press.

“You say that I am,” is his answer.

So, blasphemy it is. What more evidence do they need? The crowd has already turned. No one is going to save him now, not his betraying, denying disciples, not the crowd that got fired up during his parade. Not his dead ancestors. And not even God.

The seed of doubt has been planted. But it isn’t enough to carry out their punishment just yet.

These religious leaders have to get the state involved if they want him executed. They want him

gone, but can't kill him just yet. Then he would be a martyr for the cause. They have to discredit him first, so that's when they bring him to Pilate.

The Reading of Luke 23:3

“Are you the King of the Jews?”

The accusations the council makes are most definitely fake news, but as with all fake news, it has to have at least some degree of believability, and enough power to offend or enrage the listening party to make it stick. The assembled court of judgment takes Jesus to Pilate and says, “We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.” If you know just a little about Jesus, you know how his words and actions could easily be misconstrued as sedition – inciting rebellion against the emperor, and blasphemy – speaking sacrilegiously by claiming to be God’s Son. The Presbyterian Brief Statement of Faith summarizes it this way:

Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition,

Jesus was crucified,

suffering the depths of human pain

and giving his life for the sins of the world.

Now, Pilate listens to their complaint, but as any good government official knows, these are charges that are difficult to make stick. “Are you the king of the Jews?” he asks Jesus. An affirmative answer would be offensive to both the Council and the King, and therefore would merit swift action. But the lack of an answer makes Pilate reluctant to bring his full weight to

bear on punishing Jesus. Stirring people up isn't so much of a crime. A good flogging is intended to be the deterrent for errant teaching. Punish the teacher and the students back off pretty quickly.

Because he didn't have sufficient answers, and because ultimately Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction and most of all threatened his authority, he leaned on Herod for advice. Their "challenges" with Jesus brought them together as allies when before they had been unfriendly toward one another. Under Herod, the mocking and the abuse continue, but ultimately Pilate has to make a decision.

The Reading of Luke 23:22

"What evil has he done?"

Flogged and released. That was Pilate's go-to plan. Don't take this country boy preacher too seriously. Show him who has power and send him back to his followers defeated. Indeed, that may have rendered Jesus into a much more obscure historical position. A good teacher – perhaps some of his writings would have been left behind.

But the chief priests, the leaders, and the crowds who had followed wanted a much more violent solution. They were hungry for blood, and the crowd with the loud voice now was no longer saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." No, they were shouting, "Crucify him!" Pilate was still asking, "Why? – Why do you want him killed? What evil has he done?" What a shift! From a declarative celebration through doubt that Jesus was who he said he was, to the crowds calling for his execution. In a matter of days. Through a few brushes with

power. With friends who had known him for years unable to stand beside him when the going got tough.

This turn of events. This hardening of hearts. This vicious take down of a leader gaining too much power with too many rebellious ideas. It's a story we tell each year – maybe to remind ourselves that it's a story that happens too often even in our own time. Crowds shift. Institutional powers consolidate power for themselves and squash those who have errant ideas. Government officials distance themselves from the pain they exert on their constituents. We join Jesus for the parade from the Mount of Olives – but we have to journey with him through his trial and execution if we want to know the whole story. This week – as you prepare for Easter, remember to take the whole route, not just the easy or happy parts. Amen.