A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

“*Filled*”

April 14, 2019, Palm Sunday

Luke 19.28-40

Palm Sunday is one of those stories in Scripture that invites us to be transported in our imaginations back to that day outside the city of Jerusalem and imagine what is was like to be there as witnesses on that day. The descriptions we are given in all four Gospels are invitations to imagining the sights, the smells, the sounds of that experience. It’s one of the few stories that is in all four Gospels. Each Gospel writer gives us a bit of a different picture of the day, but they all stand in awe and wander at what was happening. It was remarkable to each of them, and together, the stories they give us make it remarkable for us.

I think the thing we come away with, for starters if nothing else is just when you think any day is going to be a normal day, things change. Life has a way of working like that. On that day, something was stirring, and everyone could feel something big was happening. Bigger than any of them had ever experienced. As Jesus approaches Jerusalem, it’s not just that the tension with the ruler finally must be confronted. It’s something even bigger than that. Bigger than the temple and its defenders; bigger than the Empire and its rulers. Bigger than the elites and their tenuous hold on their status. This was as big as all creation. As big as divine reordering of all things. They could feel it.

Therein lies a certain spiritual challenge, to see beyond what you can see to encounter the fullness of what is right there in front of your eyes. With only human eyes, it’s just a man riding a donkey, which is a bit of a silly thing. But if you can see with a penetrating vision, you encounter truth that unfolds itself right there before you.

From an unseen source, divine power was being unleashed. It’s a manifestation made known in mysteries. A never-ridden colt submits itself to a new rider as if the rider had always been its true owner. Crowds lay down their cloaks and sing ancient songs of victory. If they were silent, the stones would have become creation’s choir. One way or another, the world is changing. Over the protests of some recalcitrant status-quo-ers, change is coming. That change is already seen in animals and the people and the stones.

The way that spiritual renewal was bursting out all over the place on that day reminds me of something closer to home. It reminds me of the story of the Bamburger ranch in the Texas hill country. In 1969, David Bamburger set out to buy the worst piece of ranch land he could find in Blanco county. His realtor kept showing him pretty land with rolling hills and fertile fields. Bamburger said, “no, you’re not listening to me. Show me the worst you can find.” Then he found it: a ranch so completely neglected that it was all but dead. There was no water anywhere on 2500 acres. Skinny deer foraged among mesquite trees had taken over everything. It was all brambles, weeds, invasives, and hardpan ground. Hardly any wildlife made their homes there. Bamburger bought it and made a home there. He set out to drill multiple wells on the land, and not one found water. But the well drillers told him, there’s a cavern under there. There’s no water in it, but it’s there.

What was under the surface, unseen, waiting with potential was the renewal of one small corner of creation.

Mr. Bamburger got to work. He cleared the mesquite and planted native grasses. As the grasses grew, the roots loosened the ground so that rainwater, instead of just running off the hardpan ground, began to soak in the soil. As it soaked in, the underground aquifer began to fill. Within 3 years, the first spring appeared on the land. Then another, then another. With springs came new flowers and plants and animals, birds, deer. Within a few years, natural ponds developed. What happened on that ranch was biblical prophecy coming to life; creation was renewed.

It’s those springs bursting from the ground that give us a picture of the celebrations that burst open when Jesus came near Jerusalem. Something big is happening and emerging here. Like water from the ground. Like electricity. Like lightning. They could all feel it. The storehouse of time had come to fullness. The spiritual springs of new life were bursting out all over the place. There’s no going back now.

“Silence those people,” they said.

“If they were silent, the stones would cry out.”

There’s no going back now.

As you know, because you know what happens to Jesus in Jerusalem, even with the crowds cheering, the Pharisees’ appeal to silencing the crowd’s praise is ominous. The fresh winds blowing were also blowing in dark storm clouds. Yet Jesus rides on into the storm.

We might be tempted to say “Events were in motion that Jesus couldn’t do anything about. His fate was sealed as soon as he climbed on that colt and turned the reins toward Jerusalem.” But that’s not exactly true. It’s important to remember how it’s not true. Events were certainly in motion, but Jesus could do something about it any time he chose, I think. Jesus willingly submitted himself to the unfolding of events that began on the way to Jerusalem, and that submission was a decision that had to be renewed every step along the way. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he would pray, “Father, if you are willing, remove the cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will but yours, be done.” Even on the cross, the very real temptation to rescue himself was manifest in the taunts of one of the criminals crucified with him, “If you are the Christ, save yourself and us.”

That Jesus could have altered these events makes it even more powerful that he didn’t. He is not a helpless, hapless victim. He is willingly submitting to what comes, no matter what it is. This is love, writ in the face of rejection, pain, abandonment, suffering, and death, even death on a cross.

We have to remember this to penetrate to the spiritual truth from what we see at the cross. We face a temptation to buffer Jesus from the reality of the pain he faced. I guess it’s for good intentions—we honor him and want to protect him . . .we love him . . .so we have a very difficult time holding in our hearts the reality of all of this. So sometimes we talk about it like he was play-acting the whole thing, as if God’s will was for him to be crucified, so of course he was going to see it through and of course he was going to do this, and of course he would be resurrected because how could it be otherwise. And he knew that all along so everything was really okay.

There’s enough truth in all of that, especially in hindsight, that it’s not…wrong, but it’s also not complete. It’s not complete if we forget that he was not only fully divine, but also fully human going through all of this. In his full humanity, he worried, or we would if we were in the same situation; he dreaded what was coming, or we would if we were in the same situation; he certainly wondered if he could take another path, “take this cup from me”, and ‘when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it saying, “Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.”

We do Christ’s passion no favors when we buffer him in our theology from the pain of this whole experience. Yet, that’s what we’re tempted to do. Think about his ride into the city. The way Luke tells it, they sat him on cloaks draped over the donkey. The donkey was a pure, pristine, young animal, never ridden before. The donkey didn’t walk on the ground, but its hooves fell on cloaks laid on the ground. Palms too, though Luke doesn’t tell us about any of those. It’s all cloaks in Luke’s Gospel. So, in honoring Jesus in the way they did, as good hearted as it is, what we end up with is Jesus separated in one, two, three degrees from the ground. Not only do Jesus’ feet not touch the ground, his body doesn’t touch the donkey, whose feet don’t even touch the ground.

It’s hard to take any issue with this. Who begrudges Jesus a red-carpet like treatment? Not me. I’m all for it. Good for him. Good for them. But the problem is when we imagine that Jesus keeps more or less floating above reality; hovering above the earth, untouched and unaffected by the realities not just of his life, but of ours and our neighbors and our neighborhoods and all creation.

In the early centuries, there was a movement among some people, likely born out of the same instinct as the crowds, to celebrate Jesus and love him by protecting his identity as the divine son of God. They couldn’t help but believe, then, that Jesus wasn’t really crucified. Oh, he may have appeared to have been crucified, but he was so divine there’s no way he really was. He was so divine he couldn’t possibly have been human, especially at this moment. He could appear to be flesh and blood, but his body was just a phantom, a demonstration, a show that God put on for us so we could see God, but his body wasn’t real, so the suffering of the cross wasn’t real. It didn’t really happen to him.

So, in their minds, Jesus was buffered from real creation. His divinity was buffered from his humanity. He was buffered from real suffering, from real pain, and ultimately real death. Christians realized though that while this would be an attractive way to think of Christ, it wasn’t real, and because it wasn’t real, it couldn’t account for the fullness of what we see in Jesus Christ. And it couldn’t show us the way to be Christians in our lives and with our neighbors and in our neighborhoods and in our bodies and in all creation. It’s not that he was so divine he couldn’t possibly be human. It’s that because he was divine, he could show us what being human can mean. The incarnation is the ultimate high-touch spirituality. Christians came to realize that the divine and human natures of Christ are not in an impossible tug of war with one another. In Christ, divinity and humanity are united as one. The Spirit fills creation something like that underground cavern at the Bamburger ranch. In some places, it overflows in springs of life even in the most unlikely places. *Christ plays in ten thousand places* (Hopkins).

Christ is living water, a fountainhead that flows into all things. Christ’s divinity doesn’t float above his humanity. And his humanity doesn’t float above the realities of life and death. He is not buffered from deserts or depths or deaths or anything else in all creation that threatens to separate us from the love of God in Christ; Christ fills them.

Christ fills that place in our lives that seems like it’s a dry, impossible dessert with no hope of life. Christ fills that place. Christ fills those depths in our heart that we’re afraid can never be filled. He fills those places. Christ fills our deaths with hope of resurrection.

If nothing else reminds us of these promises, baptism does. A new Christian is immersed in the water, fully, nothing is left out. When we put ‘em in, we put ‘em all the way under. That’s the picture of the Christian life. Immersed in it. Nothing is left out.

Christians don’t nurture a spiritual life of faith buffered from the secular life of work, relationships, economies, our bodies, sickness and death. We have one life, one holy, human, broken life with its glories and its pains, its victories and failures, life and death and hope. We are one. There’s no red-carpet treatment for the spiritual journey, thanks be to God. Our feet are on the ground. Our hands are in the dirt. And our prayers and our discipleship are lived out in the transformation of our lives as we live them in the way of Christ. As we grow closer to Christ, the buffers that split our lives fall away until we become one with ourselves by becoming one with God and with one with our brothers and sisters in Christ. As Jesus moves toward Jerusalem, we go with him, rejoicing, with our feet on the ground, looking to penetrate to the gospel truth of all things, the truth that is the good news of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Copyright by Eric Howell, 2019