

Parables, Parades, and Power

Luke 19:29-40

Home Moravian Church, Palm Sunday, April 13, 2025

I want to thank Mary Siebert and Becky Hodges for so ably leading the children in our traditional “Hosanna.” Every year as Holy Week approaches, I anticipate the “Hosanna,” and it never disappoints. Nor does Palm Sunday’s story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey.

Likely the disciples did not anticipate this ride, or the cheering crowds that would turn it into a parade. Even so, according to the gospel of Luke, they were tense with anticipation.

The story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is very familiar to the church, told in all four gospels with unusually consistent details. But there are differences in the stories *around* the story, creating in each gospel a different context for Jesus’ arrival. In Matthew and Mark, right before the Triumphal Entry, Jesus restores sight to the blind; this context could mean that Jesus’ entry open’s people’s eyes to who he is. In John, right before Jesus rides into town, powerful opponents are plotting to kill Jesus; this context makes his public ride a bold challenge to earthly authority.

In Luke, what precedes the Triumphal Entry is a parable—a very unpleasant and challenging parable. Luke says that Jesus tells his disciples this parable specifically “because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately” (19:11). With an urgent need to address the disciples’ anticipation, Jesus tells a parable so discomfiting that apparently it is not even included in the schedule of readings known as the Lectionary. As far as I can tell, if we stick to the lectionary we will never read this parable

in a Sunday worship. How often does it happen that we avoid reading something Jesus urgently wanted his disciples to hear? I don't think I want to know the answer to that question; but I'm pretty sure we need to hear this parable today.

So here we go. If you're familiar with what we call the Parable of the Talents, from Matthew, you'll certainly hear the plot of that story in this reading; but you might hear a different context.

“A nobleman went to a distant region to receive royal power for himself and then return. He summoned ten of his slaves and gave them ten pounds and said to them, ‘Do business with these until I come back.’ But the citizens of his country hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, ‘We do not want this man to rule over us.’ When he returned, having received royal power, he ordered those slaves to whom he had given the money to be summoned so that he might find out what they had gained by doing business. The first came forward and said, ‘Lord, your pound has made ten more pounds.’ He said to him, ‘Well done, good slave! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small thing, take charge of ten cities.’ Then the second came, saying, ‘Lord, your pound has made five pounds.’ He said to him, ‘And you, rule over five cities.’ Then the other came, saying, ‘Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth, for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit and reap what you did not sow.’ He said to him, ‘I will judge you by your own words, you wicked slave! You knew, did you, that I was a harsh man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow? Why, then, did you not put my money into the bank? Then when I returned, I could have collected it with interest.’ He said to the bystanders, ‘Take the pound from him and give it to the one who has ten pounds.’ (And they said to him, “Lord, he has ten pounds!”) ‘I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given, but from those who have

nothing, even what they have will be taken away. But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to rule over them—bring them here and slaughter them in my presence.’ ”

Matthew’s parable of the talents has a similar outline: a master entrusts his resources to three servants. Two use them wisely; a third is punished for failing to steward his master’s resources with courage and trust. In Matthew’s parable, the operating principle is trust. In Luke, the operating principle is *power*.

In Luke’s parable, a nobleman travels to a distant region—as commentator Alan Culpepper notes, readers of Luke’s prodigal son parable know that nothing good ever happens in “a distant region”—for the purpose of gaining power. The citizens of his own country hate him, and they send a delegation to object. When the man returns, wielding royal power, he rewards the servants who traded well by putting them in charge of cities—which, since they work for him, increases his own power. He scolds the one who did not trade well, and takes away his small portion; but he reserves his vicious energy for vengeance on the citizens who did not want him in power. “Bring them here,” he orders, “and slaughter them in my presence.”

As I said in a sermon three Sundays back: When we look at the most powerful person in a parable, perhaps we should not assume we’re seeing God.

What scholars see in this parable is a direct reference to the history of the Jews and their suffering under rulers who sought the power of Rome. Particularly they point to Archelaus, son of Herod the Great, who traveled to Rome—that distant region—to ask for power, even as he was “opposed by a Jewish delegation because of his ruthless cruelty and greed.” The ancient historian Josephus wrote that Archelaus “had reduced the entire nation to helpless poverty after

taking it over in as flourishing a condition as few ever know, and he was wont to kill members of the nobility upon absurd pretexts and then take their property for himself.”¹

Luke’s parable is about, not trust, but trauma; not stewardship done right, but power gone wildly wrong. I have heard it said that if you want to know what God thinks about money, you should watch who God gives it to. We might observe the same about power.

What do the disciples anticipate, just before Jesus rides into Jerusalem? Power, and plenty of it. For a peek into their thinking, consider that in Luke, the disciples James and John ask Jesus if they can “call down fire” on a village of Samaritans.

Yet Luke is the gospel in which we see, over and over, the reversal of every expectation of power. The gospel in which Mary praises God for bringing down the powerful from their thrones, and lifting up the lowly; for filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty. It is the gospel in which Jesus pronounces blessing on the poor and woe to the rich. It is the gospel in which Jesus commends the widow for her tiny contribution and condemns those who make a show of largess. It is the gospel in which Jesus refuses to hide from the power of Herod, saying, “Go and tell that fox for me ... I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.”

Now, make no mistake: In the story of Jesus’ ride into Jerusalem there is power, and plenty of it. Jesus tells his disciples where to go, what to do, and what to say, and his simple words—“the Lord has need of this colt”—have so much power that people immediately obey. In acknowledgment of his power, people spread their cloaks on the road before him. The cheering crowd praises God “for all the deeds of power that they had seen.” They call Jesus a *king*, who comes in the name of the *Lord*—the titles of power. When they cry, “Glory in the highest

¹ R. Alan Culpepper (quoting Josephus), *Luke*, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), IX.363.

heaven”—the exact words of the angels heard by the shepherds in Luke 2—the acknowledgment of heavenly power comes full circle.

Even the Pharisees acknowledge that Jesus has power: the power to disrupt the established order, which might provoke Rome to respond with force and overrun the Jews. No wonder the Pharisees ask Jesus to use his power to silence his disciples: “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” Jesus answers that it’s out of his hands. “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Now, there’s a great line, found only in Luke’s version. Every year, when I hear it in our Holy Week readings, I’ve imagined the stones shouting, “Hosanna! Hosanna!”

But this year, reading Luke, I noticed a footnote cross-referencing Jesus’ words to the those of the Hebrew prophet Habakkuk—now *there’s* a name we don’t hear often, so let’s look at that reference, Habakkuk 2, verses 9-11:

“Alas for you who get evil gain for your house,
setting your nest on high
to be safe from the reach of harm!
You have devised shame for your house
by cutting off many peoples;
you have forfeited your life.
The very stones will cry out from the wall,
and the rafter will respond from the woodwork.”

What would the stones cry out, if they could cry? One Palm Sunday long ago, I heard a preacher say, “The stones remember.” What do they remember?

“Alas for you who heap up what is not your own! ... Alas for you who build a town by bloodshed, and found a city on iniquity!” What the stones remember is baked into the foundations of the earthbound society: brutality, oppression, power used for the further gain of the powerful.

The memories of the stones are the same memories evoked by Jesus’ parable of the royal official. With this parable, Jesus tells his disciples to anticipate not the kind of power they already know, but one that is entirely new. Then, instead of riding into Jerusalem on the shoulders of his cheering followers, or on the back of a noble steed, Jesus enters humbly, on the back of a donkey, to show his disciples what that kind of power looks like.

That royal official in the parable is not a picture of God. The one who uses power for purposes of greed, cruelty, and vengeance is not a picture of God. The picture of God is right now riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, “because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.” Grace-filled, humble, faithful, hopeful, and shining with sacrificial love, the picture of God rides even now towards his death, for us. Amen.