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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Palm Sunday (Family Communion Service)
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Psalm 118.1-2
Luke 19.28-40

The First Palm Sunday: You Are There!

“...he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. “ - Luke 19.28

The biblical story of Palm Sunday paints for us the picture of an important public event. The crowds are there, the merchants, and lurking somewhere in the background are the religious and secular authorities. It is the kind of event that we could imagine being reported by the media—TV coverage on all the networks and 24-hour reporting on CNN.

Some years ago, many years before CNN and Google (back in the dark ages when Pastor Mike was a kid), CBS news put out a series of shows about historical events called, “You Are There”. They were hosted by Walter Cronkite, and reported on historical events as if they were contemporary news. We used to see movies of these shows in school, and they made a lasting impression on me. I still remember one called, “The Death of Socrates: You Are There”.¹

I don’t think Walter Cronkite ever did a show on Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but I thought it might be useful for us to try our own hand at it this morning. How would this event be understood and interpreted if it were being reported as news today? Well, blow the dust off your imaginations as we cut now live to CBS news and the dean of newscasters, America’s most trusted man, Walter Cronkite.

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, this is Walter Cronkite reporting to you for CBS News. We are in Jerusalem during the feast of Passover about a third of the way through the first century. The capitol city is electric with excitement. It was a day like any day. All is as it was then, only, YOU ARE THERE!

The streets of Jerusalem are alive with activity this afternoon as large crowds are gathering for the entrance of Jesus of Nazareth, a popular young religious leader, into the city. Reports have just come in from a village near Bethphage that some of Jesus’ disciples have obtained a donkey or a colt—there is some confusion about which—as a mode of transportation

for their entry into the city. Though they did not seem to go through the normal animal renting procedures, they appear to have had no difficulty in obtaining the animal.

I have just been informed that Jesus is now entering the gate of the city. The crowd is waving palm branches and singing, “Hosanna”, which means, “Save us now, we pray.” The people are also spreading branches or garments (again, reports conflict) down on the road where he is riding. Rumors are circulating that a red carpet was mistakenly ordered for next weekend, and so they are making due with what they have. Let’s see if we can cut to our reporter on the street, Mike Wallace. Mike, can you tell us anything about the ride this Jesus is taking, what sort of ride does it seem to be?

This is Mike Wallace reporting from the streets of Jerusalem. Well, Walter, all indications here are that this is nothing less than a victory ride of some sorts. Jesus seems clearly to be riding on toward some sort of triumph. Though I’m not quite sure what kind of triumph is in store for him, we have been able to pick up some rumors and opinions from some of the onlookers here.

For the most part, people here in the crowd seem to think of this as a political event of some kind. There is widespread opinion abroad that Jesus is the one to be the new David, the new King of the Israelite nation. There is speculation that he will be offering up a challenge to King Herod, the King who has become quite weak during these difficult years of Roman occupation.

Walter, I talked to one fellow here who is certain that Jesus is riding on towards Herod’s palace, and that once he arrives he will demand an audience with the King himself. This fellow has heard rumor that Jesus has been making extensive use of a prominent public relations firm, so that he might intimidate Herod with the magnitude of his crowd of followers. This theory holds that he will try to use public pressure to force Herod into relinquishing his kingship.

But rumors here are not limited to speculation about minor power struggles among this marginally important occupied people. CBS News has spoken with sources who maintain that Jesus and his followers are planning an uprising against Rome itself. After all, they say, if he is to be the new David, then surely he will be able to slay the Goliath Rome. We have reports

from unconfirmed sources that Jesus and his followers have a large stockpile of arms just outside of the city.

Whatever the nature of Jesus' planned action, it is clear to this reporter that he has a wide base of loyal support that would not easily abandon him. I would go so far as to suggest that we may well be able to look back on this day and refer to it as the first victory ride of Jesus of Nazareth, perhaps King Jesus. And now, back to you in the news room, Walter.

Thank you Mike Wallace, reporting from the streets of Jerusalem. The momentum is building on the streets of the city. The songs of praise are getting louder and the branches are swinging back and forth. It appears to be an indisputably great day for Jesus and...wait, I've just been handed a bulletin with some startling new information. This information may change the way we view this whole event. We switch now to Dan Rather.

Walter, I'm standing just outside of the central administrative offices of the Jerusalem Temple at 475 Riverside Drive here in Jerusalem. I have just spoken, on promise of anonymity, with a source very close to Caiphas, the high priest of the temple.

My source tells me that at this very moment, even as only a few blocks away the crowds sing, "Hosanna," plans are being made here to turn the crowd against Jesus and to trump up charges so that the Romans might put him to death. Caiphas called a special meeting this morning of the priests and some influential laymen called Pharisees. These religious leaders wield considerable power and influence, so their actions could have tremendous bearing on the outcome of Jesus' ride into the city. Walter, I am convinced that they have the power to change it from a victory ride into a death ride.

Sources close to the meeting have been giving me regular reports on the discussions behind the closed doors of the central office. Apparently, Caiphas and the others are skeptical about reports that Jesus' followers are well armed, so they are confident that their guards could arrest him if necessary. And yet, they are equally certain that if they can represent Jesus as a political threat to the Romans, then the Romans would crucify him rather than risk the bother of a minor uprising.

I've just been handed a note by my assistant here. Let me see...this is news indeed. Again, reports are unconfirmed, but several eyewitnesses claim to have seen one of Jesus'

closest followers—one of the inner ring of 12 disciples—entering the building here. There is speculation that he has volunteered, for a large sum of cash, to cooperate with Caiphas in facilitating the arrest. Reports indicate plans for his arrest coming as early as this Thursday night.

Wait, they seem to be coming out of the meeting now. Let's see if we can get a question in. Mr. High Priest, why is such an unusual meeting taken place? Is there any connection between this meeting and the palm waving that is going on down the street? Is it true that you have been giving covert aid to a rebel within Jesus' camp? Mr. High Priest, Mr. High Priest... Well Walter, I'm afraid we aren't going to get any definite answers today, but all signs here indicate that Jesus' so-called victory ride may be leading him straight to his demise. This is Dan Rather, CBS News, back to you, Walter.

The situation here in Jerusalem seems to grow more complex by the minute. It is always our hope at CBS to offer analysis as well as raw news, and to that end we will switch now to our studio, where Bill Moyers is standing by to discuss these issues with a distinguished guest.

Thank you, Walter. Our plan was to have a discussion this afternoon with noted political analyst and journalist George Will. Mr. Will was detained, but much to our good fortune, a worthy substitute has shown up here unexpectedly. I'm sitting with the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah, I realize that it is unusual for someone who has been dead for eight centuries to appear on network television, but I would like you to know that we appreciate your taking time away from your busy schedule to be with us today.

Isaiah, you were a keen observer of Jewish political events during your day, so your perceptions on this Jesus movement might be most enlightening. Tell us, is the ride into Jerusalem that we have witnessed today a victory ride, as the crowd sees it, or is it a death ride, as the authorities seem to see it?

Well, Bill, it seems to me that the perception of the crowd, *and* the perception of the authorities, *as well as* your news angle that paints them as mutually exclusive options—it seems to me that they are all flawed. Jesus is operating in a way that is fundamentally different than any other movement to date. I don't think that your conventional categories can explain this man.

Can you elaborate for us, Isaiah?

Certainly. You see, Bill, during my time as a prophet, several hundred years ago, I saw ahead to the work of Jesus. I didn't exactly know it then, I was just speaking as I was given voice from God about a man who would be a suffering servant. Through me, God spoke of one who would be victorious, but who would not fight.

I see. Isaiah, I happen to have here a copy of your collected works, and I think I see one of the passages that you are talking about. Let me read it for our viewers:

I gave my back to smiters,
and my cheeks to those who
pulled out the beard;
I hid not my face
from shame and spitting...
Behold, the Lord God helps me,
who will declare me guilty?

(Isaiah 50.6)

That's it, Bill. That is just the kind of passage I am talking about. You see, God gave me a vision of a new kind of leader who would come to victory through suffering, who would conquer not by armies, but by a righteous death. I think the one that I spoke of has finally come.

Isaiah, if what you are saying is true, then it really doesn't make sense to say that the events in the city today represent *either* a death ride, *or* a victory ride, does it?

No, it does not make sense, Bill. It would be better to say that it is both. The crowd sees that it is a victory ride, but I'm not at all sure they understand that it is a victory that must come through defeat. When they find out, I'd lay odds in Gomorrah that they will abandon him.

Caiphas and his friends see it as a death ride—they see that they are going to have to kill him. What they don't see is that by so doing, they only give him the opportunity to show forth

a power that is greater and stronger than anything they could ever wield—the power of God’s suffering love.

Isaiah, thank you for your insights. Now, back to you, Walter.

Jerusalem, around 30 a.d. Jesus of Nazareth rides into the city. The crowd is ready to name him king. The authorities are ready to put him to death. Victory ride, death ride, or both? You viewers will have to make your own decision on that question, for it appears that we know neither the facts nor the man as well as we thought. But, as you decide, remember, it is not just a matter of historical curiosity, because for this Palm Sunday, “You Are There.” This is Walter Cronkite, good night.

¹ A fascinating “audio essay,” from 2003, can be found at www.npr.org. Cronkite reviews the history of the show, including its then-secret use of blacklisted writers.