

Colleagues, the text we'll be examining together on Thursday, March 17th will be the Palm Sunday narrative, Luke 19:28-40. I hope to see you at Shiloh Baptist Church at 10:30 as we explore the social implications of this rich passage of scripture.

Notes by verse

Verse 28 "After he had said this..." The "this" is the parable of the returning king who wants to know how his managers have handled the king's resources in his absence. This verse is Luke's way of connecting the parable with the "kingly" events to follow.

Verse 29 "...at the place called the Mount of Olives." The mountain is named in Zechariah 14:4 in a prophecy about the Lord's coming. Thus, Jesus' entry point into Jerusalem invites the preacher to ponder how Jesus strategically and intentionally fulfills Zechariah's prophecy and challenges the rule of Caesar.

Verse 36 "people kept spreading their cloaks on the road." Ironically, there is no mention of palms in Luke's "Palm" Sunday account.

Verse 37 "the whole multitude of the disciples" Throughout Luke's gospel he has created the impression of the growth of the Jesus movement, beginning in 8:1-3 with a small band of followers and ending with a "multitude of disciples."

"...began to praise God...for all the deeds of power that they had seen." This detail "for all the deeds of power that they had seen" is unique to Luke's account and signals that the upcoming events are the culmination of all that has gone before.

Verse 38 "Blessed is the king" Luke omits the cry of "hosanna" (save or rescue) found in Mark, Matthew and John and places the title, "the king" more emphatically in the center of the people's cry than do the other gospel writers.

Verse 39 "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." The Pharisees are objecting to the proclamation of Jesus as king.

Verse 40 "the stones will cry out" Jesus reply is unique to Luke's account, though Matthew has one that is similar in substance. The point is that Jesus is not rejecting the title of king being conferred upon him by the crowd.

The historical context of Jesus's procession into Jerusalem

The Roman occupation of Israel was brutal fact of everyday life.

Item: Farmers, barely able to raise enough to feed their families, paid 25% of their harvest to Rome every two years and 10% of their harvest to the Temple every year. Enormous amounts of resources were taken from the people of Israel to benefit the Roman Empire.

Item: The political, economic, and religious systems colluded with each other to oppress the people. The Temple priests were appointed directly by Roman officials.

Item: Roman troops enforced the economy of extraction with force and punished anyone who dared to rebel against the Roman authority. For example, the Romans crucified 2,000 people and left the bodies to rot outside the Galilean city of Sepphoris after a brief rebellion.

Item: The Israelites were particularly hard for the Romans to pacify. Central to the identity of Jewish people was (and is) the story of the Exodus where God delivered the people from a brutal empire ruled by Pharaoh.

Item: By the time of Jesus, people were increasingly expecting liberation from the Roman Empire just as they had been liberated from Egypt.

Item: The annual Passover celebration often turned into a time of social unrest and calls for liberation, especially in Jerusalem.

Item: Over time, the Romans perfected the art of putting on dazzling and intimidating triumphal processions. The formula was carefully planned. First, the new ruler of a vanquished city would march in on horseback accompanied by his troops, wagons loaded with treasure and prisoners in chains. The parade would be welcomed by crowds who were often forced from their houses and herded to the street by Roman soldiers in order to give the impression of popular support for the regime. There would then be speeches by the local Jewish elites, perhaps written by the Romans, welcoming the conquerors. Finally the new ruler and his entourage would proceed to the local temple to offer a cultic sacrifice to whatever gods were honored there, and to the Roman gods “who had made the conquest possible.”

Item: By the time of Jesus violent riots were such a regular feature of the season of Passover each year that the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate had begun to make it a practice every spring around Passover to leave his headquarters in Caesarea fifty miles away to the west and travel those fifty miles across the countryside and process through the streets of Jerusalem to his palace there.

Questions to Consider

1. In light of the historical context, what, if any, political implications does Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem have?
2. How has the Palm Sunday story traditionally been told (or enacted) in your congregation?
3. Does the traditional telling of the Palm Sunday story minimize or emphasize the tension taking place between the Roman Empire and the Israelites? How?
4. The bulk of Jesus’ ministry was spent with people on the edge of society. In “The Joy of the Gospel,” Pope Francis condemns economic systems that treat people as “disposable.” It can be persuasively argued that we have created a “disposable” culture in our country. Who in Lexington is considered “disposable”? What does Jesus’ march on Jerusalem mean for those people?
5. From a justice ministry perspective, what is God saying in this text to the congregations we serve in light of the current situation in our city, nation, world?

Text Study for Thursday, March 31st, 2016 at Shiloh Baptist Church

Colleagues: The scriptural text under discussion on March 31st will be St. John 20:19-31

Note

Is there anything that remains unsaid about the familiar story related in this text? Particularly in churches that use the lectionary, the story of Jesus' appearance to Thomas is the gospel reading every year on the Sunday after Easter. But even in churches that don't use the lectionary, the story is so well-known to church members and has been used as a text for sermons so often, it is still problematic. Is there a new approach to this text? Another angle of vision? New insights to bring to bear on this story? Those are some of the things we'll discuss in our text study.

One preacher's "take" on the text

"In John Irving's novel, A Prayer for Owen Meany, the narrator John has a number of conversations with his friend Owen Meany about the meaning of belief. In one scene at the schoolyard, Owen illustrates his faith in God by pointing to a gray granite statue of Mary Magdalene as twilight falls. When it has become so dark that the statue is no longer visible, Owen asks John if he knows that the statue is still there. John says that of course he knows. Owen keeps pushing (To convey the unusual quality of Owen's voice, the author capitalizes his speech):

"YOU HAVE NO DOUBT SHE'S THERE?" Owen nagged me.

"Of course I have no doubt," I said.

"BUT YOU CAN'T SEE HER—YOU COULD BE WRONG," he said.

"No, I'm not wrong—she's there. I know she's there," I yelled at him.

"YOU ABSOLUTELY KNOW SHE'S THERE—EVEN THOUGH YOU CAN'T SEE HER?" he asked me.

"Yes," I screamed.

"WELL, NOW YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT GOD," said Owen Meany. "I CAN'T SEE HIM—BUT I ABSOLUTELY KNOW HE IS THERE."

The character Owen Meany is an example of the kind of faith that St. John celebrates in the second half of John 20. Because Owen believes so fully and completely in God, he stakes his life on his conviction. He does not need signs and wonders; he believes and orients his whole life around that belief." Nancy Claire Pittman, Phillips Theological Seminary

Notes on the text

Verse 19, "the doors being shut where the disciples were for fear..." The disciples were undoubtedly afraid that what has happened to Jesus could happen to them. If we posit that Jesus was executed for daring to challenge and reform the political/economic/religious establishment, this begs the question, in what ways does fear keep us from following his example?

Verse 22, "he breathed on them," and "receive the Holy Spirit." Most commentators point to parallel usages of these phrases in Genesis 2:7 and Ezekiel 37:9-10 and see Jesus's words and actions here as God beginning a new creation.

Verse 24, “Now Thomas ...called the Twin.” Since we don’t know the name of Thomas’s twin, some preachers have used this fact to build sermons around each of us being Thomas’s twin with all that this entails—his skepticism, his refusal to trust his fellow-disciples’ testimony, etc.

Verse 25, “Unless I see his hands...” With this “unless” (*ean me* in the Greek) Thomas is indicating that Jesus must acquiesce to his conditions or he will remain in disbelief. More than one commentator has pointed to the grace and patience Jesus exhibits by bowing to Thomas’s demand.

Questions to ponder

In this text, what is God inviting us (individually and corporately) to think?

In this text, what is God inviting us (individually and corporately) to feel?

In this text, what is God inviting us (individually and corporately) to do?

What part does “seeing” and “touching” play in verifying the truth of the risen Lord for you personally?

Is skepticism and doubt a positive or a negative in the life of faith? In what ways?

Is it appropriate for the preacher to confess her or his doubts to the congregation?

What part does skepticism and doubt play in the faith of your church members and how is this exhibited in the life of your congregation?

In what ways can modern Christians “taste and see that the Lord is good”?

What implications does the following statement by Nancy Claire Pittman have for relationship building and relationship maintenance in our congregations as we pursue justice in Lexington? *“Here is the real problem with Thomas. In rejecting the disciples’ good news about what they have seen, he rebuffs the very friends with whom he has shared life for so long...Their eyes and their fingers are not enough for him; he must see for himself. Thus, community that Jesus has tried so hard to build throughout the gospel is threatened from the beginning by Thomas’s skepticism. That kind of radical suspicion of our companions in faith tears at the fabric of our churches today.”*

Sources consulted: The Gospel of Luke by Luke Timothy Johnson in the “Sacra Pagina” commentary series
Feasting on the Word, Year C, volume 2
Preaching God’s Transforming Justice, Year C

