

Sermon for Sunday, March 20, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

And so it begins,
this holiest week of the year.
Palms and praise
and a man on a young horse
making his way
into the holy
city.

The way Luke tells it,
Jesus has been working his way back to Jerusalem
from the wilderness that edges the Jordan valley
through the dry dusty hills
that surround the holy city.
His last stop
was Jericho,
and even there
his reception was mixed.
Coming into town
he saw a blind man
begging by the road,
and healed him,
and half the town came out to see him
and to praise God.
Everyone wanted to see him,
and it wasn't something
that you could buy tickets for.
So everyone was on equal footing;
whoever got there first
got to be closest.
Even the local head of taxation.
Normally
he could be assured a seat
among the local dignitaries;
this time
the only way
he could even catch a glimpse of this visitor

was to climb
a tree.
Hardly his usual
dignified approach.
So imagine his embarrassment
when Jesus
didn't just pass him by,
but stopped right underneath -
just the perfect place
for a conversation,
Jesus on the ground
and Zacchaeus
dangling from a tree branch.

And the conversant went something
like this,
“Hey Zaccheus, I'm hungry.
Get down from there.
I'm coming to your house for dinner.”

And suddenly
the very people
who had been cheering
and jostling to get close to Jesus
pulled back.
“Doesn't he know who Zacchaeus is?
A tax collector? A Roman pawn?
Any of us
would have been delighted to welcome him home.
Why go with Zacchaeus, of all people?”
And the crowds melted away,
until it was just Jesus and Zacchaeus.

And home they went,
and while they were there
Zacchaeus
had a total change of heart.
Let me give way half of everything I have to the poor,
and if I've cheated anyone, let me give them
four times what I stole.”

And Jesus' response?

"The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

It was the first hint
on that final journey
that things were not going to turn out
how everyone
expected.

When the disciples
first began to follow Jesus,
they were excited.
"Come follow me!" he said.
And as he travelled around the countryside
preaching and teaching and healing
they began to dream,
began to dream
of a new world order
where he would be king
and they would be
his royal advisors.
That's what he kept talking about,
the kingdom of God,
his kingdom,
near at hand.
And as they got closer to Jerusalem
they had begun to talk among themselves.
"This must be it," they said.
"Passover time. This must be when
he's going to declare
that he is king
and show those people up at the temple,
religious leaders they call themselves,
but we know what they truly are,
Roman collaborators,
Jesus is going to show them
who's king."

And now he's got

Zacchaeus on his side,
finally a financial backer.

“What was that? What did he say? The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost?
What is he thinking?”

And then came the parable,
a king, yes a king,
heading off into foreign country
and leaving his servants in charge.
Giving each of them the equivalent
of three months wages
to invest.

And when he came back
one had made ten times as much
and one five times.

But one had been scared
and had hidden his capital
and simply returned it.

And the king rewarded the two
who had invested well,
but the one who had been too scared,
the king took his money
and gave it to the others.

Because in the end
he hadn't done
what he'd been asked to.

That's the story Jesus told
as he sat at dinner
with Zacchaeus
and his disciples.
And the next day
they began their final day's journey towards Jerusalem.

And you know
that all the way
the disciples
were mulling over
what he had done
and what he had said.

Wondering,
worrying.

And then, as they got close,
about to go over the last ridge
between them
and the holy city,
not far from where their friends Martha and Mary and Lazarus lived
he sent two of them into the village
with instructions
to take a young horse they would find there,
and bring it back to him.

And just in case
anyone queried them
they were to say that Jesus needed it.
And you might wonder
what on earth the owner would think of that,
except you know,
Jesus did visit there a lot,
and had raised Lazarus,
so people in the village
probably know him pretty well,
and maybe Jesus was right
and they'd be fine about him borrowing
their animal.

And then, as we just read,
Jesus headed up,
over the ridge
and down the hill
towards the city.
And all the way
people put their cloaks on the ground,
a makeshift carpet,
and the disciples
shouted out
"Blessed is the king! Blessed is the king!"
Because, you know,
even if he'd been saying some pretty strange things

and wasn't exactly behaving
like the king they were expected
he was the king they had.

And they could see
some of the religious leaders
standing on the city wall.
"Stop it," the leaders shouted.
"Stop it. It's dangerous.
Going in this gate, you'll go straight past
the Roman fortress,
and the soldiers are right there in front, so bored
that they're playing dice.
Quiet down.
Or we'll all be in trouble."

And Jesus answered,
"I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

It's all been leading up to this point.
From before he was born,
the angel speaking to Joseph,
"He will be called Jesus,
for he will save his people from their sins."

The shepherds in their fields
hearing the heavenly host,
'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!

Echoed by the disciples,
"Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!"

It's all been leading here,
and yet it's nothing like what they expected.
The grand entry
on an untrained foal.

The command to be silent.
The king who is not a king.

And God
who cannot
be silenced.

By crowds angry
at Jesus' preference
for the lost.
By religious leaders
afraid of a loss of control.
By fearful disciples
clutching close
what they have,
and afraid to risk
what might be.
By us,
distracted by work, by sports, by schedules
from following our Savior
in this holiest of weeks.

But God
cannot
be silenced.
Because even
if we fail
the very stones will cry.

So come,
come join the disciples
and the religious leaders
and the soldiers,
and yes, even the stones,
as we follow the one
who is on his way
to die.
Follow him,
today as he enters Jerusalem,
on Maundy Thursday as he shares himself with his disciples

in bread and wine
body and blood,
on Good Friday
as he hangs on the cross
and is placed in the tomb,
and then, at Easter, when God speaks
not in stones
but in him Son raised
and death is defeated
and with our Savior
we find life.