

## **Following at a Distance**

Luke 19:28-38

Luke 22:39-23:24, selected verses

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I have always been fond of Palm Sunday. After all, who doesn't love a good parade? From the Irmo Okra Strut to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, we come out for these things. They are so cheerful and hopeful, two things we need more of these days. When Jesus comes riding into town on his colt with disciples and onlookers cheering, waving branches, and spreading their cloaks, I get a little excited, too. I will raise my voice with the best of them and cheer, "Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

As a preacher, Palm Sunday is a paradox for me. The voices of the multitude quickly shift from praising Jesus as King to calling for his crucifixion as a criminal. Christians will worship today with shouts of Hosanna and next Sunday even more will gather to proclaim that Christ is risen. But in between Hosanna and He is alive, we must stand in the square with the crowds and cry out "Crucify him!" We must climb that hill to Golgotha and watch Jesus die. There is no way from Palm Sunday to Easter except by the cross, and the preacher ought to guide her listeners along that path. But how do we who so joyfully and eagerly worship Jesus today find ourselves demanding his life on Friday?

As I reread Luke's passion narrative this week, a phrase stood out to me that perhaps I had barely noticed before. After Jesus prays and weeps bitterly in Gethsemane, he is betrayed by Judas, arrested, and taken for a trial before the high priest. Peter, Luke tells us, was "following at a distance" (22:54). It is here, while Jesus is being questioned that Peter thrice denies any relationship with the man who called him away from home and family to become a fisher of men. How is it that we go from praising Jesus one day to betraying, denying, or crucifying him the next? Perhaps because we, too, are prone to follow Jesus at a distance instead of drawing near to him.

There are two senses in which we can keep Jesus close. First we keep Jesus close at heart when we find ourselves in deep personal relationship with him through the Holy Spirit. In John's gospel, just after the last supper and foot washing, Jesus assures his followers that even though he is leaving them, he will not leave them orphaned. A Comforter is coming, he says, one who will not only be with you forever, but who will be in you (John 14:16-18). We know this Comforter as the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Christ himself. We cannot get much closer to Jesus than to have his Spirit dwelling within our very souls. And when we are mindful of Christ's constant presence there comes upon us a peace that passes understanding and transcends worldly circumstances.

While this Spirit is a gift, it is one that must be tended to. Our knowledge of its presence increases when we spend quiet time discerning its voice. Its promptings are more readily

understood when we listen through the Scriptures. The more we do these things, the more we attune ourselves to the Holy Spirit of Christ, the more we find ourselves at peace, content, and trusting God for each moment.

There is also a second sense in which we are called to draw near to Christ. Keeping Christ close also means that we must walk where he walks, go where he goes. This is what Eugene Peterson means when he writes about the “Jesus Way.” We cannot wander off onto our own paths or follow him at a distance, as Peter did just before he denied his relationship with the one he had called Messiah.

If we are honest about who Jesus is, what he did, and where his life led him we cannot fool ourselves into believing that drawing close to Jesus is all sunshine and butterflies or that there is nothing more to it than praying and reading the Bible. Jesus’ earthly ministry pitted him against the civil and religious leaders of his day. Just last week, Andrew Purves reminded us that there were those who were so outraged by Jesus’ teaching that they sought to throw him off a cliff (Luke 4:29). Jesus’ desire to heal the sick and broken led him to fellowship with the undesirable people of his day: (They are not so different from the undesirable people of our day.): the prostitutes, the disabled, the mentally ill, and the foreigners, among others. All those crowds who sang Hosanna may have been enthralled with Jesus’ miraculous deeds of power, but they, too preferred to follow at a distance, not getting too close to Jesus and his associates.

Like Peter, we prefer to follow at a distance, watching the struggles of our Lord but careful not to get arrested ourselves. Like Peter, we are willing to let Jesus suffer on our behalf but we are not quite willing to suffer for him. Friends, following close to Jesus is no safe life. It comes with great risk. In fact, it should probably come with a warning label like those prescription drug commercials: Caution! Side effects of following Jesus may include friendships with unsavory characters, generosity that seems reckless, advocacy for justice that upsets the status quo, and – in extreme cases – death.

If our closeness with Jesus is one-sided, if we draw near to him spiritually but do not walk the way Jesus walked, then we find ourselves with the crowds celebrating him as “King” in one breath and calling for his crucifixion in the next. A one-sided nearness to Christ quickly becomes no more than self-centered personal piety. On the other hand, if we do not keep Jesus close in a deep and personal way, if we do not tend to Spirit within us, then we cannot hope to endure the times of trial and danger that come to his faithful followers. Indeed, that is the miracle of following close to Jesus in both senses of the word. When Jesus is intimately near to us and when we walk the Jesus Way, we find that the peace and serenity given by the Holy Spirit never depart from us, despite the risks and challenges of discipleship.

This deep nearness to God is what enabled Jesus to pray in Gethsemane, “Father if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done,” even as he got up to face his betrayer. This deep nearness is what Jesus wishes for his disciples, past and present, when he urges them to “pray that you might not come in to the time of trial.”

I love Palm Sunday, but it is a paradox. We are right to parade and celebrate, for Jesus is indeed the King who rules over the world, even today. But we do our celebrating with an eye toward

Golgotha. We remember that following Jesus closely is a life-changing, earth-shaking, boundary-breaking ministry marked not only by great risk but also by great joy and peace that passes understanding and transcends worldly circumstances. In these last days of Lent, may you follow Jesus closely – even too close for comfort – so that you may rejoice deeply – even filled with the Holy Spirit – when Easter dawns at last. Amen.