

Sermon for Palm Sunday, April 10, 2022  
Luke 19:28-40

### Our Part in the Play

Have any of you ever been in a play? When you were a kid, or in college maybe? I was in a grand total of two plays in college. As it happened, I had a leading role in both of them. But let's just say it was a good thing I was a music major rather than a theater major.

There is a type of theater particularly popular right now called "street theater." As the name implies, these are plays that are performed outdoors, smack dab in the middle of public life. Often they will appear to be spontaneous and unstaged, maybe even unrehearsed. And often they will involve mime, in which one or more actors do not speak, but act out a story only using gestures, sometimes with white make-up on their faces.

One place where street theater has been effectively used is in Israel-Palestine, specifically in the occupied territories. There are at least five theater companies in the West Bank who use street theater as a form of non-violent resistance, of speaking prophetically to the powers that be.

As it turns out, street theater has been used in the Holy Land for a long, long time. Thousands of years ago, God told the prophet Isaiah to "*Go, and loose the sackcloth from your loins and take your sandals off your feet,*" and then to simply walk around Judah "*naked and barefoot*" [Isaiah 20:2]. And he did this for three years! God intended it to be a sign to the people that the King of Assyria would soon capture them and lead them away, "*naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered*" (Isaiah 20:1-6). Whether God had given Isaiah any specific "lines" to say, Scripture curiously doesn't say; he may have simply been a silent mime the whole time.

A century later, God told the prophet Jeremiah to "*make yourself a yoke of straps and bars, and put them on your neck.*" And then he gave Jeremiah some specific lines to say on his behalf: "*It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the people and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever I please. Now I have given all these lands into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, my servant.*" Needless to say, these lines weren't particularly well-received by Jeremiah's "audience"; I doubt he received a standing ovation.

Then, approximately six centuries later, we have this morning's story from Luke, in which Jesus rides down into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives on the back of a donkey. What is going on here? Is this another case of God-ordained, prophetic street theater, this time with the Son of God himself playing the leading role?

We read in the opening verse that "*after he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.*" Actually, he has been slowly and methodically making his way to Jerusalem for ten chapters—we could say this was one long and extended piece of street theater.

"*When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives . . .*" Lois and I, along with Doug and Holly, went to this very place as part of the Jerusalem Seminar eleven years ago. The Mount of Olives is directly east of Jerusalem. The city, you'll recall, is built on another mountain called Mount Zion. Both are relatively high hills, but in between them is the Kidron Valley. There is a paved footpath winding westward down from the Mount of Olives, and at a certain point near the beginning of the footpath you begin to get spectacular views of the city of Jerusalem in all its glory. In Jesus' time it would have been equally spectacular. Jerusalem was like the center of the universe for the Jewish people. The

temple was there, the center of their religious and spiritual life, God's supposed dwelling place on earth. And in many ways it was the center of power. The High Priests were there. The Roman prefect Pilate was there. And Roman soldiers were everywhere.

Luke says that Jesus "*sent two of his disciples*" into a village just ahead. And he gave them very specific instructions. It's as if Jesus himself was the director of this piece of street theater. He told them exactly where they would find a donkey colt tied up, and that they should untie it and bring it to him. He even gave them some lines to say if the owner were to ask them "*Why are you untying it?*" "*The Lord needs it,*" they were to say. The Lord. That's interesting. Which lord? There were many lords.

Everything unfolded just as he said it would; you might almost think it had been rehearsed ahead of time. When they had led the donkey colt back to Jesus, the disciples first put their cloaks on it, and then Luke says "*they set Jesus on it.*" Was this part of the play? And he began to slowly ride, down from the Mt. of Olives, directly toward Jerusalem. What was going on here? What did it all mean?

There was that story back in 2 Kings of the Israelites' army commander Jehu, riding into Jerusalem while the crowds proclaimed him their new king. But he had ridden on a warhorse, not a donkey. The prophet Zechariah, centuries later, had proclaimed this: "*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem, Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey*" [Zechariah 9:9]. Zechariah was foretelling the long-awaited Messiah, the "anointed one" who would bring peace—but only after he had obtained victory. Was Jesus this Messiah? If so, what or where was his victory?

His disciples caught on quickly. They spread their cloaks on the path in front of Jesus, important props for this play. They began to shout, "*Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.*" The first half of their lines came directly from Psalm 118. The second half echoed the angels in Luke 2 on the night of Jesus' birth, except the angels had proclaimed "peace on earth." These disciples apparently didn't want peace on earth. Not just yet.

Here in Luke we have only this "*multitude of disciples*" participating in the play. In the other gospels we have large crowds proclaiming him king and waving palm branches. But even with just his own disciples, they raised a ruckus loud enough that some Pharisees became concerned. "*Teacher, order your disciples to stop!*" But he answered, "*I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.*" In this play, even supposedly inanimate stones had been given a part.

But here is my question for you, for us. What is our part in the play? Are we like those two disciples who dutifully proclaim "the Lord needs it" when our cue comes (assuming of course we know which "lord" we are even referring to)? If not, then what are the lines we're directed to recite? Did Jesus himself give us our script, in the words of Scripture perhaps, his words as recorded in the four gospels? There are a lot of great lines in these four books, about love and forgiveness and worshipping God rather than mammon. Or do we get our lines from somewhere else—from our current culture, for example? Do we simply repeat what we hear on television and talk shows? Do we really proclaim and want a Messiah who is humble, or one who is proud and arrogant? Would we prefer our Messiah to ride a warhorse, rather than a donkey? An armored tank, rather than, say, a 20-year-old Toyota Prius, or even a bicycle?

Would we find ourselves in the large crowds, rather than the much smaller group of his truly committed disciples? Would we proclaim him as king one minute, shouting "Hosanna—

save us, we beseech you.” Then turn on him the next minute, or day or year, shouting “Crucify him!” Because after all, he doesn’t look like a real king. He’s a fake, isn’t he? Do we want peace? Or do we want some war first? Both to defeat our enemies and to ramp up our economy?

Are we willing to address our lines directly to the “powers that be,” the political and religious powers of the day? And how long are we willing to stay with him in this extended street theater? All the way to Jerusalem? That sounds fun—and exciting! But what about all the way . . . to the cross? That . . . doesn’t sound fun!

May we all consider carefully what kind of part we are willing to have in this play. May we learn our lines well. May we stay on script. May we follow to a T Jesus’ stage directions. May we still be with him when the curtain comes down.

Amen.