

Blessed Is He Who Comes in the Name of the Lord

Luke 19:28-40

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We have heard this story so many times, haven't we? It's fun to watch the children parade around the sanctuary, just like they do at Epiphany. Back then, they were parading as royalty to the manger of the Christ child. This Sunday they are parading again, this time with Jesus. This time he is an adult. This time he is leading the parade toward the cross.

This story is so familiar that sometimes we lose track of its meaning, of its immediacy for the people who were there that day. So, I thought we might revisit this story through a piece of art by one of my favorite liturgical artists, John August Swanson. Swanson's wonderful Palm Sunday picture can be found from the Vanderbilt Divinity Library at this [link here](#), and I invite you to pull up the image now and let's look at it together. Let's wonder what this palm procession meant for some of the people there, and why they might have shouted, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

The first person I notice in this picture is right down in the lower lefthand corner. Do you see the little child in yellow, leaning against their mother, using a crutch? I see another person with a crutch, too, also wearing yellow, following close behind Jesus. Surely, they have heard of Jesus' healing miracles. Do they bless Jesus because they, themselves, hope for healing? Do they long to throw down their crutches and run with the wind? Blessed is the one who speaks with the authority of God Almighty, who can make their bodies whole.

I see a lot of people waving flags here. Up at the top of the picture, I see a green flag with white stripes on the edge. And I see several flags that appear to have red and blue stripes, and other flags with only a single color. I wonder if these flag wavers are just ordinary people, caught up in the excitement of the moment, who grabbed sticks and bed sheets to make a flag to welcome Jesus. Blessed is the one who gives us something to be excited about. Or are these flag wavers Zealots – members of a nationalistic sect that hated the Roman occupiers? Are they using flags to signal a coming uprising and hoping Jesus will lead it? Down with the occupiers! Blessed is the one who comes from the Kingdom of God, against the Roman Empire.

I see women in this crowd – some with children, but most without. They are waving palm branches and throwing cloaks on the path in front of Jesus' colt. What have these women heard about Jesus? Perhaps they have heard that he cured Peter's mother-in-law of a terrible fever, or that he raised Jairus's daughter from death back to life. Or maybe they have heard that he honored the gift of the widow's mite more than he valued great gifts from wealthy and powerful men. There were plenty of wealthy people in Jerusalem in those days. It was a center of great wealth, compared to the rural areas. But the women in this picture don't look wealthy to me. I don't see jewelry or fancy clothing on any of them. Do the women here welcome Jesus because he can see them – because he values them as full human beings – because he recognizes and values the lives they lead? Blessed is the one who comes to look into my eyes and to see my own soul.

There were maybe 40,000 year-round residents in Jerusalem in Jesus' day, but on feast days like Passover, the city swelled to around 200,000. Pilgrims came from far and wide. So, I imagine that most of the people who are following Jesus in this picture are not from Jerusalem. They enter with him from east of the city, and I imagine that they have been gathered up from the rural areas all around. They might be fishermen or farmers, or they might be incredibly poor people who used to own a plot of land, handed down from their ancestors since the time that the people of Israel came to the Promised Land. They scratched out a living on that land and usually had enough to eat. Then one year there was a bad crop and everything fell apart. The only way they could go on was to mortgage their land for the money to make it through till the next harvest. And when that crop failed as well, the land was lost, probably to someone who lived in a city like Jerusalem. The countryside was full of share croppers and beggars – people who had once owned a share of the Promised Land itself, but who lost it to bad weather or bad luck and to an economic system that made it easy for really rich people to become fabulously wealthy, a system that made it way too hard for poor people even to survive. What do these people, these who follow Jesus from the countryside into the city, what do they see in him? Blessed is the one who comes in the name of justice, one who will put the weight of God's thumb on the scales in favor of those who are mistreated and oppressed. Blessed is the one who comes to bring good news to the poor, to declare the year of the Lord's favor, the great Jubilee, when all debts will be cancelled and everyone can reclaim their own little piece of the Promised Land. Blessed is he!

I see soldiers in this picture. Lots and lots of soldiers. Usually, the Temple authorities kept order and collected taxes on behalf of the Roman overlords, and they were hated enough for their part in the Roman occupation. But on major feast days, the Romans themselves marched into town from their encampment on the Mediterranean. When all the pilgrims piled into town there was just too much threat of an uprising, so Pilate himself and all his soldiers marched in to be sure that order prevailed. Roman order. And here comes this throng of people, this poor people's parade, following this trouble maker. What are the soldiers thinking? Are they afraid of the crowd? Are they wary of what Jesus will say to stir them up? They hear "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" I wonder what THEY think that means.

Where do YOU fit in this picture? What are you waiting for as Jesus rides into town? Are you waiting for him to overturn the political system? Are you hoping to be healed? Are you longing for justice? Are you a little anxious about the mischief Jesus might unleash in your life? Are you hoping that he will look into your eyes as he passes, and see your soul?

Jesus is coming. What are you waiting for?

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

Amen