



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Refrain
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Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Luke 19:28-40

I've been thinking a lot about music lately, and the way music comes together. One of my favorite experiences growing up is when my dad gave me the cassette tape of *Tommy* by The Who. What an incredible album that is! As a drummer, Keith Moon was always a hero, and he does some of his best work on *Tommy*. But I also absolutely loved the idea of a whole album having a single idea, one story to tell, no matter how many songs it took to tell it. Now all week this week when I told the youth group kids that I was listening to *Tommy* and calling it research, they looked at me as though I had three heads. But when I told just about anyone else, I got the same sing-song response. "Tommy can you hear me?" It's this beautiful refrain throughout the whole musical. They bring it back in different keys, different meters, different voices, but it's always there.

Because my job is awesome, a few months ago for our J and Ed Variety Podcast, we had the opportunity to interview Christian Hip-Hop Artist Peabod. One of the things he was telling us that struck me was that with music streaming services these days, it almost doesn't make sense for artists to make whole albums anymore. You get paid per listen of a song, so if you just release a single every now and again, it's easier than putting together a full album. And while that makes financial sense for the artist, there's a big piece of me that mourns the loss of a concept album. I really liked those.

Which, as I'm sure you can see, leads us to Palm Sunday. Scholars believe that there would have been two parades around this Passover festival. From the west of

Jerusalem would have come the Governor, a man by the name of Pontus Pilate. You'll hear more about him this week I'm sure. Pilate would have rolled out the red carpet for himself. He would be surrounded by soldiers, chariots, weapons, and guards. Think of it as a major military parade like we see every now and again around the world. And for his part, Pilate would have had a royal mode of transportation. He would have had the finest horses, spotless animals. He would have the most glimmering golden chariots. His wardrobe would have been spotless. Anything and everything he could do to make himself look powerful. And as this parade from the west would roll on, the soldiers would "gently encourage" the people watching the parade to chant *pax Romana*, which means "Peace of Rome."

The irony here kind of speaks for itself, does it not? Peace is achieved by amassing weapons of war? Cheering crowds are a result of the guy holding the spear? Can you really bully someone in to peace?

Pilate and his crew were coming to Jerusalem this week, during the festival of Passover, to try to keep the peace. This was a time when the likelihood of unrest and rebellion would have been high, and so they brought in their military might to maintain the *pax Romana*, to keep the peace, to keep things from getting out of hand.

And then there's the other parade. Coming in from the east, humble and riding on a donkey, is King Jesus. This event is so critically important that it is one of the few accounts of Jesus life that all four gospel writers have included.

Now when I first started reading this Palm Sunday story as given to us in Luke, I started to turn into a bit of a biblical scholar nerd. But there are some key differences in Luke's story from the other gospels. For instance, Luke puts way more emphasis on Jesus' disciples, rather than the nameless crowd in other versions. These disciples actually "set Jesus on the colt," almost making it seem like they picked him up and literally placed him in the saddle. Luke is also the only author who has Jesus quoting Habakuk 2:11- "The very stones will cry out from the wall." And did you notice that Luke has a different cheer in the "multitude of the disciples" as Jesus rides past? There's actually no word "Hosanna" here. Instead, Luke says "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven."

Now I'm already a little bit down the nerd train, so let's go a little bit farther! Most scholars are in agreement that Mark was the first of the gospels, and that Matthew and Luke would definitely have had points taken off for plagiarism. They borrowed from Mark and some other sources, and that's why we have three gospels that are strikingly similar. So if Luke's version is different, and he's one of the later writers, the differences are probably important. So what is Luke trying to do here?

I believe that the Palm Sunday story is the refrain to the concept album Luke has been working on from the beginning.

Bruce preached last week from the Christmas story, which was timely because that story is what set all of this in motion. While I want nothing to do with the snow of that season, let's take our minds back to the shepherds out in the field tending their flocks by night. The heavenly hosts that

show up sing loudly “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”

So this is a story that begins with peace on earth. Truth be told, that’s one of the biggest themes of Christmas isn’t it? We all celebrate a season of calm and peace, or at least we try to through all the presents and shopping and food and family dinners and getting kids read for church. But still...peace.

And here at Palm Sunday, Luke fills in the other half of the refrain. Not only is there to be peace on earth. We need to have peace in heaven.

The need for peace on earth is terribly evident both then and now, isn’t it? At its very most basic level, we could define peace as the absence of conflict. And while that is the most basic level, though there are layers to this concept of peace, our world can’t even get the basics right, can we? The prophets told us long ago that there would be wars and rumors of wars, and that line still seems to hold up pretty well today. So I totally understand the need for angels to wish us peace on earth.

But why would the crowd need to wish for peace in heaven? Heaven is seen as so peaceful that some have told me that they kind of don’t want to go, because it will be so boring. There will be harps and singing and clouds and angels. What could be more peaceful? Where’s the conflict?

I believe the conflict is in what the Divine wants. From the very beginning, our Creator has desired a relationship with you and me. We of course know how the story goes. Humanity started out ok, and held it together for as long as we possibly could: a whole two chapters of the Bible. Then

we sinned, and this sin permeated everything we have and know. Our relationship with God was fractured, and so God couldn't have the very thing that God wanted. Some people assume that heaven is the reward for a life of faithful following after Jesus Christ, and I believe that's only half right. Heaven is the place where that reward will take place. The reward for a life of faithful following Jesus Christ is relationship with the Triune God who has longed for unhindered relationship with us from the beginning.

I would argue that from the moment that humanity fell, there was no peace in heaven, because God could not have what God wanted.

And so by echoing the peace claim in Bethlehem, in proclaiming a peace in heaven, Luke is telling us exactly what Jesus is marching in to town to do. Jesus is on his way to restore our relationship with the Triune God. He is on his way to buy back our seat at the table. He is on his way to show us exactly how much God loves us. He is on his way to restore peace in heaven. And by the way, no one is going to stop him. Even if you could somehow shut up the followers, the crowds of disciples crying out and willing this peace to happen, the very rocks beneath their feet would shout it all the louder.

The early Christians borrowed a phrase when they were contemplating these peace claims. They called all of this the *pax Christi*. The peace of Christ.

But up until now, this has all be pretty cool Bible nerd stuff. What exactly are we to do with all of this information? How does it affect us on a daily basis? I believe there are two things for us to pay close attention to.

For starters, we need to contemplate the cost of peace. Interesting, is it not, that Luke puts this proclamation of peace at this point in the Holy Week story. Jesus is just getting to town. He is still going to flip over the tables in the temple. He is still going to offer some teaching that are going to bother the religious leaders of his day. He is still going to commemorate what's at hand with a simple meal of bread and wine. He is still going to be betrayed. He is still going to be arrested. He is still going to be killed. He is still going to be buried. All of that is yet to come.

In fact it occurs to me that if you only tuned in on Sundays during Holy Week, all you would get was the good stuff. We have a super powerful and peaceful procession today, and then we have a resurrection on Easter. But to do that would miss all of this action in between. That would be a bit like buying the single, and never actually listening to the full album of the Gospel.

My encouragement to all of us is to make sure that we contemplate the cost of peace, of the restoration of our relationship with the Triune God. Of course, there are some factions in Christianity that get this all wrong. There are some among us who turn an encouragement like this into some sort of cosmic guilt trip.

I have been on a number of weekend retreats and camps, and there are some pre-determined times in the course of those events for the speaker to give a salvation talk. And I have been to some of these where the speaker will in gruesome and painful detail describe what crucifixion is, how it kills a person, and how exactly Jesus suffered. I love Jesus, and it kind of creeps me out every time I hear it. The idea they try to communicate is that if you only knew how much Jesus had to suffer, you would live a much better

life. But that kind of talk always leaves me empty and wanting more.

Then a few years back I was at a camp where I anticipated that kind of talk, but was friends with the person who was speaking, so I was curious where he was going to take things. He pulled out the book of Luke, and just sat before us reading from chapter 22-24. Just the story. Just the basics. Just the facts.

He did this because grace is free, but it isn't cheap. We don't want to be overrun by guilt, but we also don't want to forget just how far our God was willing to go to restore our relationship. We owe it to ourselves this week to spend some time meditating on what Jesus offered up for us. We could spend some time in the labyrinth downstairs in Fellowship Hall. We could join here for Maundy Thursday service at 7:30. We could come to the chapel sometime between noon and three on Good Friday. Or at the very least, we could sit with our calendars and intentionally pick out an hour or so to meditate before our Lord. My encouragement would be to remember the price of peace Christ paid not as a way to feel guilty, but as a reminder of the love that God has for us.

We contemplate the cost of peace, but we also join in singing the refrain. Luke has in more ways than one given us a refrain. He's called back his reminder that Jesus is about to bring peace on earth by reminding us that Jesus is also to give peace in heaven. Luke is reminding us of the cost of peace, not as a way of guilt but as a reminder of how far God is willing to go to get in relationship with us. Luke is comparing and contrasting the parade of *pax Romana* with the humble and lowly procession of *pax Christi*.

Much like I have been singing “Tommy can you hear me?” all week, I wonder what it would look like for us to sing the refrain of *pax Christi*?

When the world insists to us that the only way to peace is through violence and power and intimidation, I wonder what it would look like for us to sing back *pax Christi*?

When our own families become crazy, when we gather this weekend to celebrate and share meals and kids are running around and we want to pull our hair out at the insanity of it all, I wonder what it would look like to catch our breath and whisper to ourselves *pax Christi*?

When we forget how much God loves us, when we have questions in our heart about whether we could truly be the object of the God of Creation’s affections, when we aren’t sure of ourselves or our own standing, could we have the eternal ear worm of *pax Christi* to keep us on track?

Of course, this might look strange to the rest of the world. I’m sure there were more than a few in the crowd who watched their Messiah ride by on a donkey and shrugged their shoulders at the idea of calling him king.

“Kings don’t look like that!”

“Peace isn’t the way of the world.”

“Don’t be naive!”

Friends, others may think peace is naive, but it’s not. When we are in conflict, we sing the refrain. When we are uncertain, we sing the refrain. When others threaten, we sing

the refrain. When the lonely and outcast and downtrodden are in our midst, we sing the refrain. When the world has lost her way, we sing the refrain.

Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!

My friends, *pax Christi!* May the peace of Christ be yours. Amen.



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