

THE FIRST PALM SUNDAY

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Grace Church in New York
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Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "If these were silent, the stones would shout out." (Luke 19:39-40)

Fun fact: today is the 174th Palm Sunday that the good people of Grace Church have celebrated in this building. The first Palm Sunday under this roof was April 5, 1846. In those days, the Sunday before Easter wasn't even called "Palm Sunday," but simply – wait for it – "The Sunday Next before Easter." Thus, it's unlikely that palm branches were blessed and distributed. Indeed, 19th century Episcopal worship was austere by today's standards, even grim. But my guess is that the people in the pews felt no lack of stimulation. They were probably on sensory overload. Just a month earlier this new, gothic-revival church had been consecrated, and most had never seen anything like it. Outside, the white marble stones made the structure look as if it were stacked out of sugar cubes. Inside, the scale was beguiling. It was big enough to be a cathedral, but small enough to be a parish church. Without doubt, the young, untested architect, James Renwick, Jr. had built a house of worship that was the talk of the town. Indeed, even today when we are silent these stones shout out the praises of God.

Nevertheless, a question about Renwick has always persisted: how could an edifice like this spring from the mind of a 24-year old? At the time, did he really know what he was doing? Some say that his early success here was more a matter of luck than genius. When Renwick won the design competition, and beat out older established architects, he wasn't an architect at all, but an engineer. Why did he win? Well, he had lucky connections. He was the grandson of Henry Brevoort, the owner of this parcel of land that the vestry was trying to buy. It was a lucky location; the site at the bend in Broadway is commanding: the perfect place for anyone wanting to build and be noticed. It was a lucky time; the gothic revival was just coming into fashion. For James Renwick, Jr., the perfect window of opportunity opened. Obviously, Grace Church has stood the test of time, and Renwick himself went on to become one of the most celebrated architects of the 19th century. Even still we wonder: when he set out to design and build this church, did he grasp what he would achieve in terms of beauty, proportion, and durability (peeling plaster notwithstanding)? Did he really know what he was doing?

Today, of course, our focus is not on the first Palm Sunday in Grace Church, but the first Palm Sunday in Jerusalem, in or about the year 29 AD. When Jesus approached the gates of the city to begin what would be the last week of his earthly life, no one was calling the day Palm Sunday. Nor did anyone have the faintest notion that it was "the Sunday next before Easter." What they were hoping was that the true king of Israel was finally arriving to oust any and all royal pretenders to the throne, including Roman occupiers and temple authorities. Jesus the Messiah was coming to establish the kingdom of God. He was not a prophet coming to predict the kingdom. Instead, he was the king coming to build it. Such were the high hopes and expectations of those who welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem. Were they right? Well, nearly two-thousand years later even secular historians would name Jesus as perhaps the single most influential person ever to live. Why? Because the movement that Jesus had launched kicked into high gear on the first Palm Sunday, and rapidly turned the known world upside down. Truly, he was the talk of the town, and here we are talking about him still.

Nevertheless, we might ask the same question of Jesus that we asked of James Renwick, Jr. Did Jesus really know what he was doing as he began Holy Week? Or was he, at least on Palm

Sunday, just getting incredibly lucky? Some say it was mostly a matter of luck. It was a lucky location; Jerusalem occupies a commanding site and was the center of Jewish identity and spirituality. It was also under Roman rule, so for anyone wanting to stake a claim and be noticed, it was the perfect place. It was a lucky time. As Jesus approached Jerusalem, it just happened to be Passover, so the city would be bursting with as many as a million pilgrims who had come to celebrate the feast. Jesus had lucky connections. He was an heir of King David, and was making statements and telling stories that hinted at his oneness with God. For Jesus, the perfect window of opportunity was mysteriously opening. How else do you explain the miraculous availability of the colt that just happened to be there for the taking and the fulfilling of Zechariah's ancient prophecy?

In today's Gospel reading we heard Luke's account of the first Palm Sunday. Strangely, Luke makes no mention of palm branches, nor does he report that the people shouted Hosanna. But with or without palm branches, the celebration was anything but austere or grim. The people were on sensory overload. Apparently, they went wild with enthusiasm, taking off their cloaks and spreading them in Jesus' path. And they proclaimed, "*Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!*" It was a royal welcome that threatened the uneasy peace between the Jewish citizens and their Roman occupiers. So the Pharisees warned Jesus to discourage the festivity. Did he comply? He did not. He told them that if the people went silent, the very stones of the captive city would shout out in praise of the true king.

So that's the way it was, at least according to Luke, on the first Palm Sunday in Jerusalem. Still we wonder: did Jesus know what he was doing, or was he merely riding along on a lucky wave of circumstance that came to a crashing halt a few days later? I believe that a closer reading of the texts reveals that Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. He drew near to Jerusalem at the beginning of Passover not because he was lucky, but because he timed it. He secured the colt not by luck or magic, but because he arranged it. He received a royal welcome because he and his disciples staged it. The scene that Luke describes is still a good way outside of the city. Note well that it was the multitude of *disciples* who were singing his praise, and the Pharisees warned Jesus to tell his *disciples* to stop. The revelers weren't strangers who suddenly, spontaneously threw a tickertape parade to welcome Jesus. No, Jesus and the disciples carefully orchestrated his approach and arrival so as not leave anything to luck or chance. It was ingenious.

But genius alone isn't enough to explain what was happening. What we discover in Jesus is another category altogether: *passion*. It was his passion to do what he was doing. The same could be said of James Renwick, Jr., the architect of this church. Sadly, Renwick's personal and professional records were lost in a devastating fire that destroyed his studio after his death, so we can't really get into the mind of the man. But some of his father's papers survive in which the elder Renwick noted that his young son, from earliest age, had a strong desire to become an architect and build a cathedral. Something bigger was calling to him and driving him along. It was his passion.

Likewise, Jesus. It would be an understatement to say that Jesus sensed in himself a driving passion to build the kingdom of God. To do so was his calling, his mission, his very reason to be. Did he believe that he was the Messiah whom the prophets foretold? Most certainly he did. That he was the Messiah was the impression he intended to make with his carefully choreographed entrance into the city. But Jesus' understanding of what it meant to be the Messiah was not in accord with popular expectations. Most thought the Messiah would be a conquering king or a great warrior astride a battle horse. How else could you oust the Romans? Clearly, Jesus followed a completely different script, one that he'd discerned by studying the prophet Isaiah. Jesus had seized on some overlooked passages about a mysterious figure we've come to call the Suffering

Servant. Our Old Testament reading today (Isaiah 50:4-9) is one of them. The servant would build the kingdom not through military might or royal decrees, not by piling one stone upon another, but by embodying the love of God, and teaching God's ways, even to the point of suffering and dying. The kingdom would come because the God of love would send his servant, who would bear the message of God's love, and be obedient to his calling no matter what the cost.

Jesus' goal in entering Jerusalem was to take the message of God's true and loving ways directly to the center of power, right to the heart of the movers and shakers of the city. By the end of the week he would come face-to-face with Annas and Caiaphas the high priests, Herod Antipas the King of the Jews, and Pontius Pilate the Roman governor. I've often wondered what Jesus would have done if his message had turned out to be more wildly successful than he or anyone else could have imagined. Suppose the high priests had suddenly done an about-face and declared that Jesus was in fact the Messiah. "Jesus, the keys to the temple are yours." Suppose that King Herod had said essentially the same thing: "Jesus, you are the true king of the Jews. This crown and this elegant robe are yours to wear, not mine. Hail to you, king of the Jews." Suppose that Pontius Pilate had a similar reaction to Jesus. Suppose he handed over the symbols of his Roman rule and said, "The soldiers are at your command. Rule the city as you will." What would Jesus have done?

I believe that Jesus would have done the same thing he did throughout his ministry whenever the crowds tried to make him a temporal king. He would have declined. Why? Because Jesus never intended to wear Herod's crown and robe. He wasn't interested in wielding Pontius Pilate's temporal power. He did not come to be another high priest like Annas or Caiaphas who would administer the temple. I don't think that Jesus wanted to replace these movers and shakers. Rather, he wanted to transform them, convert them. He wanted to get in their heads, and on their heart, and under their skin. His desire was never to build a kingdom made of stone. He wanted to build a kingdom of flesh and blood, composed of people who had a new heart and a new spirit, who would join him in the movement to restore all people to unity with God and each other.

Two-thousand years ago Jesus the Messiah inaugurated a spiritual kingdom, and his passion for it to spread remains the same today. 173 years ago James Renwick, Jr. built a church, and still today these stones shout out with praise to God. Whether it's Palm Sunday AD 29, or 1846, or 2019, by the power of the Spirit of God, Jesus lives. He stands at the door and knocks. You see, Jerusalem is us. Jerusalem is the inner depths of the human heart, yours and mine. His goal is to get into our heads and under our skin. His passion is to live in us, and we in him. The building site he wants to go to work on is us – the good people of Grace Church. It is your life and mine. We are the living stones that he yearns to construct into a mansion of the Lord (1 Peter 1:5). *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God (1 Corinthians 6:19)?*

Today is the day decide if Jesus really knows what he's doing: Yes or No? If your answer is yes, then don't be silent, but shout out as if this were your first Palm Sunday: *"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"*

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