3-27/28-21 Lent in Plain Sight: Coats Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 19:29-40 NRSV Palm Sunday

Hallelujah! Hosanna! Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!

This morning, we have heard these words proclaimed through Scripture and song. They are praise to Jesus, offered throughout the four Gospels. They are shouts of faith, and hope.

Today, I invite you to reflect on the ways you offer your praise to Jesus—and what holds you back from proclaiming your faith. And as we have done throughout the Lenten season, I invite you to allow an ordinary element to remind you of this day. Today, may your coats remind you to offer your praise!

Coats? You may say? Why coats? Thankfully, our weather is getting warmer. We’ve exchanged our heavy winter coats for light spring jackets. Or no jackets at all unless it is raining.

Think about how many coats you have in your closet at home. Do you have a winter coat and a light jacket? Do you have a dressier coat and one you wear to do yardwork? Do you have a rain jacket or a ski coat? If you have even two coats in your closet, you are richer than many in this country.

Our coats are meant to protect us against the elements. Yet how many times do our coats also become a shield? We don’t want to get involved in a crisis because we may soil our coat. We are afraid to hug another person and mess up their fancy coat. We walk with our coats zipped up and hands in our pockets to portray an image that says, don’t mess with me. We allow our coats to become a barrier between ourselves and others.

Now imagine you lived in the time of Jesus. Your coat was your cloak, material that would wrap around you, and often your cloak would symbolize your status. Have a cloak that is made of finer material and unsoiled? You are one of the rich and powerful. Have a cloak that is made of sturdy material, without embellishment? You are one of the working class. Have a cloak that is tattered and worn, used not only to wrap around your body, but also to cover you up or collect coins alongside the road? You are an outcast, one who relied on the generosity of others.

I would venture to guess in the time of Jesus cloaks were as important as shoes, for status and protection. A person would not readily give up their cloak.

And yet, in today’s story, the disciples do. They lay down their cloaks as they lift up their praise to Jesus.

Picture the sights and sounds and smells of that day. Jews from all over the known world were entering the city of Jerusalem to celebrate Passover at the Temple. They arrived in caravans,

some walking and some riding on camels and donkeys and horses. Men and women, children and servants, animals for sacrifice, supplies for cooking and camping.

There is excitement and hope and expectancy and tension in the air, like there often was during a Jewish festival.

The tension came from Judea still being an occupied territory of Rome. So as the numbers of Jews rose in the city, so did the number of Roman troops. Decked out in their armor, they marched with a show of force, the metal on the bottom of their sandals echoing off the cobblestone streets.

Among the many caravans arriving in Jerusalem was a caravan from the northern Galilee region

via the desert road from Jericho. In that caravan was Jesus, surrounded by his disciples and followers and curiosity seekers. While we often imagine only Jesus and his twelve disciples around the Passover table, in reality there were many more who had arrived in town with Jesus, and most likely were in this caravan, in the upper room, and in Jerusalem. Women like Mary and Joanna and Jesus’ mother Mary. Other followers of Jesus, including his brothers.

Acts 1 numbered the crowd at Jesus’ Ascension at 120 followers. So there could have been a very large crowd still with Jesus at that first Palm Sunday procession.

His followers were excited, expecting something to happen in Jerusalem that week. They knew Jesus had been focused on the city for some time, but his followers could not understand

that Jesus was focused on Jerusalem as the place he would suffer and die before being risen from the dead. He had tried to warn them, tried to teach them, yet they would not, could not listen.

When outside the city, near the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples ahead to borrow a colt, the foal of a donkey. Not just any colt, but one that had not yet been ridden.

Anyone who knew their scriptures recognized the significance of Jesus riding into the city on the back of a young and unridden colt. They knew that unridden animals were used for holy purposes just as unblemished animals were used for sacrifice. They knew that the prophet Zechariah proclaimed, “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.” (Zech 9:9)

When these two disciples returned to Jesus, they threw their cloaks on the colt’s back, so that Jesus did not have to ride bareback. They covered the colt as a saddle covers the back of a horse today.

Can you picture Jesus, a grown man, on the back of a colt? This was no triumphant warrior entering the city. The great stallions were entering from the other side, with the military and religious and political leaders in all their pomp and circumstance. Jesus entered in humility, on the back of a colt.

Yet the disciples responded with honoring Jesus as they would honor royalty. As he approached the descent from the Mount of Olives to the city gate, the crowd of his disciples and followers began to rejoice. They “praised God with a loud voice for all the deeds of power they had seen.” They laid their cloaks on the road in front of Jesus, creating a hodgepodge red carpet as a sign of honor and praise. The Gospel of Luke is missing the main element we associate with this day—palms! There are no palms in his procession. Yet we know from the other Gospels

that the crowd surrounding Jesus waved palms as we would wave flags at a Fourth of July celebration. The palms they also laid along the road, with their cloaks, as a signal that new leadership was about to enter.

No longer were the disciples timid or silent. Now, with a loud voice, these followers of Jesus praised God for Jesus. Adapting a verse from the Passover liturgy found in Psalm 118,

they shouted out, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”(19:38)

This was a dangerous proclamation to make, in the city of the Jewish Temple, in the midst of many Roman soldiers. Yet the disciples dared to declare Jesus as the king who comes in the name of the Lord!

If a cloak was a valuable possession, what possessed these disciples to lay down their cloaks

as they lifted up their praise, allowing a donkey and others to trample their cloaks? They truly believed in the one who was in their midst. They truly believed all that they had seen and heard and been taught and experienced over the past three years. They truly believed in Jesus as God’s Messiah.

So they offered their reverence, love and loyalty the only way they knew how—by laying down their cloaks and offering up their praise.

Consider how many times in the Gospels Jesus tells his disciples, as well as many whom he healed, not to tell anyone. The time wasn’t right. No one would believe the miracle. They didn’t understand what had happened. Yet now, entering the great city of Jerusalem, Jesus didn’t stop their praise. He didn’t stop their stories of good news.

He knew, however, that their praise that day was misguided. They praised him as Messiah, which was true. But they were still wanting a conquering warrior, not a suffering servant. They missed the meaning of the donkey colt in the midst of their procession. Jesus entered in humility not power, in sacrifice not conquest.

Jesus knew what awaited him—not a crown and a throne, but a cross and thorns. The only reason we celebrate this Palm Parade today is because of the rest of the story of this week.

Jesus’ meal with his disciples. Jesus’ prayer in the Garden. Jesus’ betrayal and arrest. Jesus’ suffering and death. Then Jesus’ breaking the bonds of death through his resurrection. All of that is still to come.

Today, however, is a day for praise! The disciples held nothing back. They offered their cloaks.

They offered their praise. They offered their lives to follow Jesus.

How about us? Do we often find ourselves offering our all to Jesus? Or do we wrap our cloaks, our coats, our hesitancy and our fears tighter around us and step back from the journey of faith?

Jill Duffield asks:

On this Palm Sunday, how do we respond like those who spread their coats on the road before Jesus? Too often we suppress both our praise and our generosity. We fear looking foolish.

We calculate the cost of our giving. We value the protection of our coats over the worship of the Lord. We justify standing in the back, observing the parade, wrapped tightly in our cloak by saying things like “there are enough coats on the road already” or “if Jesus really needs it, I will give it to him.” Jesus himself tells the Pharisees that if the crowds did not shout, the stones would. When we hold back our cries of “hosanna” and cling to our coats, creation sings, and the streets overflow with palms and songs. Jesus still enters triumphantly into Jerusalem, with or without our coat on the road ahead of him. The loss when we reserve our garment and squelch our shouts is mostly ours.

--Jill Duffield *Lent in Plain Sight p.139-141*

Are you ever afraid to offer an amen in worship? Are you ever hesitant to tell a co-worker you’re a Jesus follower? Do you feel silly stopping and praying in a restaurant? Do you get ridiculed when you want everyone to truly feel welcomed by the church? Have you been shunned by others when you share why black and Asian lives matter to you? Have you been misunderstood because of your faith in Jesus?

How much holds us back from living by faith! Then add in this past year a pandemic that tore us apart, and restrictions that still lessen our desire to be together. We’ve had to be intentional to keep up relationships, to keep up study of God’s word, to keep up ways to love our community.

We’re not perfect. At times we have tightened our coats around us, and at times we’ve thrown them off to follow Jesus, like blind Bartimaeus when he was healed.

Today, we are invited once again to throw off all that holds us back—our fears and hesitancy,

our contentment and complacency, our misunderstood convictions and selfish desires—

throw it all off and follow Jesus. Let go of what holds us back and lift up our praise to a Savior who forgives us, a Savior who redeems us, a Savior who transforms us, a Savior who brings life after death.

Remember that the truth of God will never be silenced!

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day, the Pharisees, demanded that Jesus “Order his disciples to stop” their praise. Maybe they felt the celebration was premature. Maybe they felt praise of a new king would catch the attention of the Roman authorities. Maybe they felt the parade was too spontaneous and feared the crowd becoming an unruly mob. Or maybe they simply did not believe the stories of healing and miracle, never considering for a moment that Jesus could really be the long-awaited Messiah.

Whatever the reason, the Pharisees demanded that the disciples stop their shouting and singing and praise of Jesus. They wanted silence, and they wanted it immediately. Jesus responded to their demand with a surprising response: “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Governments and religious fanatics nowadays still seek to silence certain factions or groups of individuals. Yet the truth of God will continue to be proclaimed. Even in China and Vietnam.

Even in our schools and cities. Even in our churches and homes.

God is a God of mercy and grace, of justice and love, of truth and redemption. We praise today because we know how the story of this holy week will end. Death will not have the final word. God will.

So may we lay down today what doesn’t honor God. Let us lay down our selfish desires and our judgment of others. Let us lay down our doubt and fear. Let us lay down our hesitancy and excuses. Let us lay down all that holds us back from a journey following Jesus.

Let us throw off our coats, and lift up our praise.

Then let us follow Jesus through the rest of this week, and the rest of our lives, from despair to hope, from death to resurrection.

May it be so. Let us pray.