

Luke 19:28-40

²⁸After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.²⁹When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples,³⁰saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here.”³¹If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’”³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them.³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?”³⁴They said, “The Lord needs it.”³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road.³⁷As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen,³⁸saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.”⁴⁰He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Sermon

If I asked you what Vincent Van Gogh’s painting *Starry Night* has to do with Palm Sunday, I wonder what you would say? You see, I heard a surprising podcast this week through The SALT project. This group of writers have been running a series on Vincent Van Gogh—the man and his art— through Lent. Out of curiosity this week, I listened to a podcast by Matthew Myer Boulton in which he holds up *Starry Night*, Van Gogh’s perhaps most well-known painting, with Palm Sunday. A stretch, if you would have asked me at the beginning of the podcast. But Matthew Myer Boulton weaves the two together in ways I had not heard before.

You see, while Vincent van Gogh likely painted *Starry Night* in a day, he studied color theory for nearly a decade of his life. Over Van Gogh’s time studying color theory, he wrote multiple letters to his sister about the way certain colors “make one another shine in their differences” and how other colors are “terribly disparate complimentaries that reinforce each other through their opposition.”¹ Colors like black-blue and yellow-orange.

At the same time that Van Gogh was studying color theory, photography was making its way onto the scene as an art form. People understandably were wowed by photography. Photography allowed one to create a picture of something that represented a scene or person exactly as they were at that moment.

But when people said that photography captured images as they really are, Van Gogh blanched. If you took a photograph of a night sky (just a photograph, not some cool time lapse photo) it might reveal a dark blackish blue sky with white dots in it. But that’s not how stars really are. When you really look at the stars for a long time, you see that they aren’t just white dots, they are each different. Some might have a pink or greenish hue to them. And because of

¹ Matthew Myer Boulton, *The Gospel According to Vincent – Part Six: “Starry Night,”* SALT Project, { [HYPERLINK "https://www.saltproject.org/podcast-strange-new-world/2022/4/6/the-gospel-according-to-vincent-part-six-starry-night" }](https://www.saltproject.org/podcast-strange-new-world/2022/4/6/the-gospel-according-to-vincent-part-six-starry-night) }

the way we see them through our atmosphere, they twinkle. “Some yellow, some red, some flashing back and forth between blue and green—plus millions of tiny ones so small they look like phosphorescent clouds.”² As seen in *Starry Night*, and to Van Gogh’s point, a painting can reveal that stars aren’t stagnant, they have an essence of movement, and color, and twinkle around them. These are things that aren’t necessarily captured in a photograph.

A painting, Van Gogh argued, can paint something more true, more real, more dynamic, speaking to the relationship that exists between things. Which is more than what we can see through a still photograph of a moment in time. Photography reveals what *exists*, but painting reveals something’s *essence*, its truer, inner nature. (Being one who loves photography, I’m sure we could get into a hearty dialogue here, and there are some things about photography that give us what painting can’t. But this is the debate Van Gogh was having with photography.)

We do not have photos of what happened on Palm Sunday. Indeed, the Gospel writers each painted a different version particular to what their communities needed to hear about that day, that parade, that moment. So while we don’t know exactly what happened, what kind of animal Jesus rode in on, what kind of things exactly people waved or threw on the ground, we do know this.

We know that we have two contrasting events—both parades in fact—in the city of Jerusalem happening roughly around the same time.³ They were as different as the disparate colors Van Gogh was talking about. As different as a photograph from a painting. One parade captured a temporary truth of the moment—a photograph if you will—and another parade that canvassed a more lasting essence, a truer nature—a painting—to use Van Gogh’s comparison.

In the scripture for Palm Sunday that Nathan and Rachel interpreted, we hear of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a colt (some gospels say a donkey, one says a colt *and* a donkey, which would’ve been weird.) The crowds lay down their cloaks for Jesus and the colt. Some gospels have the people shouting, “Hosanna” and waving palm branches. Ours today doesn’t. The details matter, and they tell us about the people for whom they were written, but for today, let’s focus on the point that Jesus’ parade wasn’t they only parade happening that day.

We know that around the time this scripture occurred in Jerusalem that there would be many, many visitors plus everyday inhabitants in Jerusalem who would be gathering for the sacred holiday celebration of the Passover. As a result, the occupying Roman authorities would always ensure that military parades took place right before the people’s festival days. Roman officials would ride into the city on war horses, marching with troops with fierce weapons and armor. Why? To “keep the peace,” at least peace as what was ironically called the *Pax Romana*, Roman Peace, a “peace” that was kept through fear, oppression, military conquest, and violence. Thanks to the military parade happening on one side of town, there could be no question for city dwellers and guests to the city as to what would happen if they stepped out of line, or if anyone even thought about an uprising against the *Pax Romana*.

On one side of town, then, we can imagine a parade of intimidating military might, and on the other side, coming down from the Mount of Olives, Jesus on a colt with cloaks and palm

² Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Sacramental Sky” sermon on Genesis 15:1-6 in *Always A Guest*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2020, p 30.

³ Thanks to Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan’s book, *The Last Week*.

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branches and shouts of Hosanna, meaning, “save us.” Most scholars believe that Jesus’ parade was an intentional “piece of street theater, dramatizing the prophet Zechariah’s ancient prophecy of the long-awaited divine monarch arriving on a humble donkey, announcing peace to the nations. The crowds play[ed] their part, rejoicing and shouting ‘hosanna!’ [It was the enactment of, a solidarity with, a living into] the great jubilee, the time of freedom and justice, the new era has begun.”⁴ Imagine being there, living into that hope.

Two completely different parades, as different as a photograph is from a painting. The Roman army marched into town, imposing and suffocating, representing what *existed* just as a photograph would convey. And Jesus rode into town on a humble colt or donkey depending on which gospel you read, representing jubilant freedom, justice, and a peace that the world could not understand; a better version than simply what *existed*. The parade with Jesus (Jesus, who had given the last 3 years completely over to the expansion of God’s loving realm) represented a truer, deeper, lasting essence of life. An essence that even betraying friends, authorities, governors, and crucifixion would not be able to take away.

The point, you see, is that when it comes to Palm Sunday, if we are to be this dualistic, and I’m not saying we should be, the Roman parade of oppression is like a photograph showing something that existed and was horrible, but was also temporary. Jesus and his followers, enacting street theater that harkening back to ancient prophecies and ancestral heroes, tapped into the long-held hope and the knowledge that freedom and justice are possible. In doing so, they captured something more dynamic, something of a deeper essence. Jesus’ parade is like the stars that shift colors and glitter with movement, mystery, and wonder, revealing an essence that is living and lasting.

We know that Jesus’ parade will lead to betrayal, heartbreak, murder and grief. But it also represents what Jesus stood for and what the people longed for: a way of life that shows people that they matter, that God’s love and grace are a bigger story that lasts forever, and that pain and suffering did not, do not, will not have the last word. Palm Sunday invites us to experience the excitement, the hope, the wonder, the anticipation, and also the tension, the anger, the desire of the people to rise up. They are telling a new story, about a different way to live and be in the world together. May we feel the comfort and challenge to live into Jesus’ story, and may it inspire us to do the same. Amen.

⁴ Matthew Myer Boulton, The Gospel According to Vincent – Part Six: “Starry Night,” SALT Project, { [HYPERLINK "https://www.saltproject.org/podcast-strange-new-world/2022/4/6/the-gospel-according-to-vincent-part-six-starry-night"](https://www.saltproject.org/podcast-strange-new-world/2022/4/6/the-gospel-according-to-vincent-part-six-starry-night) }

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