

“Running the Gauntlet”

a sermon on Luke 19:28-40

by Nancy Raca, Covenant UMC, March 20, 2016 (Palm Sunday)

Finally, here we are. We’ve come to the last week of Lent. Since February 10th, we – at least we as pastors – have been looking to this week with a mix of excitement and trepidation (Holy Week is a lot of work for pastors!). Maybe you’ve been looking forward to the end of Lent, too. Maybe you have given something up for Lent and you’re looking forward to having that chocolate bunny on Easter morning or a nice juicy steak. But theologically speaking, the past few weeks have been a time of reflection, of preparation, of sacrifice. Lent is a time when we prepare ourselves for the holiest time of the Christian year, the time when Jesus goes to the cross – for us! – and then is resurrected to a new life. Lent is a time to ponder the nature of our relationship with God and the nature of this Messiah.

So far this Lent, we’ve seen Jesus be tempted by the devil, transfigured in glory, and anointed with costly perfume. We’ve heard about God’s wasteful grace through the parables of the fig tree and of the prodigal son.

But today’s story, the story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, is the one that, for me, has the most impact. Several years ago, as I began reading the Bible on a more regular basis, it was this story – which occurs in all four Gospels – that *convinced* me that Jesus was truly the Messiah. If I had doubts before that about the divinity of Jesus, or about God’s plan for him, this story laid them to rest.

Here, after 20 years or so, Jesus is finally returning to Jerusalem, the center of religious and political life in Judea. His followers cry out, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" They are welcoming a new leader, a king, someone who will change their lives.

But Jesus is unlike any other King they've ever heard of. And certainly unlike any King I've ever heard of. In human history and in human mythology, kings ride great white steeds. They wear bright colors and fur and place a lot of emphasis on their majesty. Even our modern day "kings" ride in limos and carefully orchestrate their appearances to make them seem as powerful, and even blessed, as possible. King-making these days is as much about optics as it is about actual leadership.

So it was here, as I read the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, that I realized that here is a *different* kind of king. The kind who doesn't overstage his arrival. The kind who rides a simple, functional beast of burden. The kind who sits on dusty cloaks rather than fine furs.

If you ask me, no *human* king trying to establish an *earthly* rule would act as Jesus did in this story. So, it seems to me that Jesus is different. It seems to me that Jesus is *not* of this world. He is, in fact, divine – the Messiah who has come to usher in the Kingdom of God.

But wait, because what's special about Jesus doesn't end there. If Jesus is fully divine, he is also *fully human*. This is one of the great mysteries of the Christian faith

– that Jesus, who is from God and who *is* God, came to us in a human form – a *fully* human form, who experienced pain and worry and hope and excitement, just as we do.

So today I'm seeing this event in Jesus' life in a new light. What was Jesus *feeling* as he rode into Jerusalem? This story is usually referred to as "Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem." But how triumphal do you think Jesus felt?

Jesus knew what was ahead. Jesus knew that this trip was probably his last. Three times already in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has foretold the events of Holy Week. Luke 9:22 tells us that Jesus said, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." Jesus predicts that he will be betrayed, and flogged, and spat upon.

So Jesus knows that the coming days are going to be hard – really, really hard. It doesn't sound very "triumphal" to me. And you know what? I feel bad for Jesus. Because I know how that is. I know what it's like to know that you have something really unpleasant or difficult ahead of you. And I imagine you do, too.

Standing at the beginning of something really difficult stinks. It's like having lead feet that just won't move. Or having a knot in your stomach so tight that you can't eat. You're grumpy around your family and friends, distracted, unable to sleep.

But you know there's only one way forward, and that's through. Jesus knew this. We see that in the first line of our reading today: it says Jesus "continued on ahead."

Despite all he knew, or even feared, he moved ahead.

Years ago – like, in medieval times – there was a practice called “running the gauntlet.” This was a form of punishment in which the guilty party had to run between two rows of men armed with weapons. As he ran, the people on the sides would beat him with their swords. Can you imagine what it must have felt like to stand at the top of that line? Knowing that you were about to undergo tremendous pain, but that the only way past it was *through* it? Today we still use the term “running the gauntlet,” but it’s come to mean a series of trials that we have to endure.

So have you ever had to run the gauntlet? Fortunately, I’ve never had anything as threatening as what Jesus faced, but I’ve had plenty of times when I knew I had to move ahead even though it was going to be pretty uncomfortable. When I knew that the only way forward was through. Like before I went before my ordination board interviews last year. Or the time I flew to Arizona to be there as my father died.

Maybe you feel like you’re running the gauntlet right now. Maybe you or a loved one is facing a serious illness and difficult treatments. Maybe you have a series of exams you need to pass in order to move forward with school or your career. Maybe you are looking for a job and facing endless rounds of cold calls and interviews. Or maybe you’re in a bad relationship and the steps you need to take to get out of it are too difficult to even contemplate.

If you are, I feel you. But more importantly, Jesus feels you. Because Jesus, for all his divinity, knows our human fears. He knows our human pain. He knows them because he *lived* them. He knows them because he, too, had to run the gauntlet in

order to get to better times. Jesus continued on ahead, despite great personal cost that included betrayal, arguments, flogging, humiliation, and even death, because that was the *only* way to get to Easter.

This Holy Week, remember that no matter what you face, God promises that good times are coming. It may not be easy or painless. But God, in the form of Jesus, the King who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey instead of a white horse, is at your side. So as you wave your palms today in celebration of the coming of the Savior, remember that the King is coming for *you* – and continue on ahead.