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Today's Palm Sunday reading from our Common Lectionary is a reading from the Gospel of Luke,

### **Luke 19:28-40**

After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "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. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'"

So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road.

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

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

### **“Entering the City to Come”**

Our palm procession with the youth this morning reminds me in some ways of a big **parade**, full of celebration and cheer. As we raise the palms and shout hosanna's I think about a time a few years ago when I landed spontaneously in a somewhat *similar* moment of praise. Half a world away, I was leading a delegation of Americans and British citizens through Iraq with Voices in the Wilderness, as we documented the effects of what we discovered were *crushing* economic sanctions on ordinary Iraqi's. At that point in 2001 there had already been a full ten years of impact of the sanctions. Our group of about ten people was invited to meet up with a group of university students in Baghdad at an arts school, so that we might see a glimpse of what economic sanctions had meant for the youth who had been cut off from the rest of the world - in terms of schooling, research, and resources. We had pretty much *steeled* ourselves for a visit, such as those

we had already had to the hospitals, where we might learn a next litany of essentials of modern life that people were doing without—this time it might not be the antibiotics that had been embargoed, but we wondered if we might learn again that the electrical power was being rationed and forcing students to study by candlelight, let alone forgoing any use of the internet. We thought we might be asked why Americans wanted Iraqi's to be thrown backwards in time, from what used to be an exemplary university, to one that we heard was now decrepit and lacking supplies even as basic as current text books.

I do not think our team, already immensely disturbed by the state of siege people were living under, as seen in our visits to the hospitals and displaced person's camps, could ever have imagined that five years later this same country would have refugees pouring out its borders due to the complete and total invasion, occupation, and war throughout Iraq. But I also do not think that we ever thought we would be invited to a party that day! A parade. A festival. Right in the midst of the ghastly grip of sanctions. What we found was that the students at the Baghdad art school were courageously carrying on with fantastic determination. Yes we saw a rather vacant photography classroom, for example, where to learn the craft, one could only dream how to develop prints (for the chemicals needed to develop photo's had even been embargoed.) But despite this kind of degraded environment at a university, these students were still embodying the spirit of artists- something that could not be taken away.

For on that day our team was led by an engaging young leader named Dalia, through an enormous public festival at the urban campus- an actual street party celebration of the art school. The occasion we asked? It turned out it was simply to honor the survival of a school that might have been closed under the grip of sanctions, but instead was alive with a robust spirit, if not the necessary supplies. The students were not going to let the U.N./U.S. sanctions take away their drive to hope and believe that they would overcome the odds, even though it had been ten years. So as we walked out of the campus, we became engulfed by a full-on colorful parade, with students playing musical instruments, filling the streets- and dancing, and confetti flying through the air. The spirit was one of defiance and even victory, that despite the sanctions, students would indeed carry on in their work, supplies or not, outdated books or not, teachers leaving the country or not, and there would still be life full of art and music and heart and inspiration. The next generations to come of artists would in fact be nurtured.

The reminder today is that in the midst of the struggle is where we access the spirit we need to endure. At the Baghdad arts school, there was hope that they would one day again, break free of the sanctions. For people could not wait to have their imaginations cultivated. The need to dream of building the city to come was acute and raw and alive and urgent. And they met it.

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Palm Sunday, one of the primary days in our Christian calendar is one that is *chock full* of ironies. We have this glorious procession with palms, which our youth and children here so beautifully created this morning. We re-enacted Jesus' triumphal entry in to Jerusalem. We prepared the way with reverence- similar to those who threw down their coats in Jerusalem. For they saw in Jesus someone who was worthy of the highest honor. It was a street celebration of a courageous leader.

**But** we also know that there is a rich story behind this celebration that will lead us to the more disturbing and somber parts of our week to come. During Jesus' week in Jerusalem, there was what we would now call a state sponsored execution, driven by special interest parties (boy those Pharisees were really caught between a rock and a hard place weren't they?!) Death comes to the one who was living in the ways of a kingdom that was dramatically different from the Roman Empire's kingdom. And as we move through this week we will see *what* it was that set him apart and *why* it was that he was eventually murdered – brutally- for voicing his conviction that a different kind of city and kingdom were needed on earth. Riding in to the city on a donkey was in fact a perfect symbol in opposition to the *regalia* that would accompany a Roman authority's entry in to Jerusalem in a *well-adorned chariot*. Riding on a colt spoke of the one who was willing to be last not first. We are going to take a look at this here.

But let us not miss the possibility that the hosannas are also sort of *pleading*... Hosanna- 'God save us' - - this may be a time where both a prayer for protection and strength are needed- a plea- not to be confused with a more superficial "hooray!" or "bravo!" or "cheers!" But maybe Hosanna - God save us- and God be with us- we are about to do a bold thing. We are heading in to Jerusalem with a claim. We will no longer follow the ways of Rome. We will follow someone who cares for the sick and feeds the poor and is concerned that all should have life, not treasure only for some. I believe that those in the procession may have been well aware of what they were about to provoke. And so, as those of you who have gone in to direct actions know, we both pray for things to go as well as they can, and yet we must simultaneously also step out boldly.

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Now for this congregation there is no lack of awareness that Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are key parts of our week ahead- that we are not meant to have a parade this Sunday and then an Easter party next Sunday with nothing in between. Look for example at the fact that this year for our Good Friday Walk for Justice in this city of Chicago, Wellington is sponsoring *three* out of the ten stations of the cross, and even the children, as I understand, are the ones running the crucifixion station! So here at Wellington you wont find a lot of fear in facing the real deal.

During the season of Lent we remember that the early Christians fasted for forty days to prepare for the second coming of Christ—what they thought might be a very literal and physical event perhaps. It is somewhat different for us, but we too have been preparing throughout the forty days. For us, to "prepare ye the way of the lord" as our song says, we set about clearing out a lot of static in order to just sharpen our connection with God. For today to simply be able to hear our God- it takes a lot of sifting and siphoning - in a hyper consumer driven culture. So in practiced ways, we have given up things that separate us from our connection with God. In some cases the faithful choice has been instead to *take on* a practice in Lent that may help sharpen our connection with our spirit source. This season offers us a focused chance to sort out some of the extra curricular background noises, and lean in, listening more closely. (Fewer dropped calls you could say!) So we give things up, or try new practices in order to have less static and a *clearer crisper* line with God.

But it is not just individualistic private tune-ups that we are about. We gathered together here at church for the Lenten series to study how to turn from an empire toward an earth community.<sup>1</sup> We also came together as an affinity group to speak to our Congress people about shutting off the funding for the war in Iraq.<sup>2</sup> People in our congregation have been sitting down with our Congress people in meeting after meeting to let them know that the city we from this community are helping to build is not one where Cook County health services are shut down, while our Congress members vote yes to over \$1 billion more for a misguided war. (Now I don't know if Pam and Gerald and others rode in to Obama's office this week on a colt, but I trust the message of opposition to more funding for war was similar to that of those going in to Jerusalem, saying that a greedy empire collecting taxes from the poor was no longer going to be what people followed!) And also during this season of Lent, to sharpen our connection with god, we gather in rooms here at church before worship and throughout the week, to pray together for the city to come, ready to work for one of which we can be *proud*.

So as we try to prioritize the ways we can "rev up" our connection with God in the midst of our very full lives, we find that sometimes these are very hard fought battles, hour by hour, very intimate struggles, to empower ourselves to do the things that can sharpen our communication with God. For a few weeks we take a disciplined try at getting up twenty minutes earlier and doing a brief morning meditation. Or, we re-acquaint with how to prioritize a time in the day to sit at a simple altar and pray. We want that channel with God to be a little sharper, a little clearer.

For me, I am constantly amazed, both at how hard it is and how rewarding it is, as I practice prioritizing a time in the day when I get to just be with God. I turn off the computer, shove aside the task list, and throw on my sneakers, and head out to the lakefront for a run. As I do, there is indeed a sharper connection for God and me as I run along the lake. And then... how much clearer things look when I return to the task list. With a little bit of input, the rewards we reap are many.

At Wellington we strike that balance of being politically active outwardly in the choice areas where we are most passionate, and we also are contemplative and quiet at times. Our spirits are fed *while* we extend ourselves to take risks on behalf of others. And in the procession to Jerusalem I suspect that the people making their way in knew that they were playing with fire. This was no simple city ticker tape parade. This was a public open bold act of defiance that put the authorities on notice that folks had found a more authentic way to live. And today, in order to hear how we are to proceed- to process- to parade-- we find we can listen to God in the active outward struggle AND in the quiet nourishing silence with God.

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<sup>1</sup> Wellington Ave UCC offered a five part Lenten discussion series in March, 2007 based on David Korten's book, *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*. See [www.wellingtonaveucc.org](http://www.wellingtonaveucc.org).

<sup>2</sup> Wellington Ave UCC participated with 'Voices for Creative Nonviolence' in the Occupation Project, a campaign of sustained nonviolent civil disobedience aimed at ending the U.S. war in and occupation of Iraq. For February through April, 2007 occupations occurred across the country at the offices of Representatives and Senators who refuse to pledge to vote against additional war funding. See [www.vcnv.org](http://www.vcnv.org).

When we look closely at the details of the familiar story of the procession in to Jerusalem, we can find clues as to how we today might build the city to come. There is more here than just a ramp up to get ready to celebrate again at Easter in a week. The clues to understand this procession lie in the context of what was happening before the entry in to Jerusalem. The authorities in Jerusalem, both Roman and synagogue leaders, knew that Jesus had been gathering crowds wherever he went at this point. The word was out about what kinds of healings and miracles had happened when he was preaching and teaching in various parts of Judea... in Galilee, in Nazareth, in Capernaum, in Gerasenes, in Bethsaida. We see this as we read through Luke's account. He had cured people of long suffering... from leprosy, from disease, ... he had given a crippled person freedom of movement, ...and he had restored sight to a blind man who had faith. Worse, he had restored the withered hand of a man, right in the synagogue on the Sabbath... so long-standing laws had been turned upside down. Sometimes this produced a frenzy of excitement and awe and confusion.

Many of the miracles were open for a mass public audience to see... nets full of fish, stormy waters commanded to be still, feeding five thousand people with only a few fish... And then as time went on, the stakes got even higher... By the point in our story where Jesus rides in to Jerusalem, people have taken note. We could say with hindsight that Jesus was pretty much experiencing the peak of his career in ministry, if you will! And these crowds and healings were starting to capture what we today would say was some really decent media attention!

And so as Jesus and the disciples came toward Jerusalem, the city administrators for the empire, who were charged with keeping order for Rome, had definitely, we can be confident, already by this point certainly put some sort of a "homeland security patrol" on this guy! So the authorities were watching.

They were watching Jesus because he had been provoking people's consciousness; he had been telling parables that turned the Pharisee's and others worldviews absolutely inside out; he had been disturbing the peace because he told stories about how tax collectors might be wise to order their lives. He was telling religious leaders that if they obsessed about following the letter of the law they might just miss the big picture! He did not hold back in the face of status. And this boldness caught on with folks as they witnessed his miracles and healings. So this ambitious parade caught on, and *the parade itself was also an additional turning upside down of the existing order*. It was a subversive act embodying resistance. But what public threat could a donkey really have been you say? But it was a thumbing of the nose on a large public scale at the mighty Roman Empire! The colt and the cloaks and the waving of palms directly mocked the regal empire- for people were claiming, using simple common symbols, that they would no longer be complicit with the authority of Rome, and that they were *unseating* the false leaders for a force more powerful. They chose to follow the teachings of someone who *cared first about the small and the weak* and someone who cared for neighbors- not the might of an empire. The slippery and often greedy ways of the Roman empire- could not, we know now, two thousand years later, even touch, the magnetism of the one who moved with integrity.

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So let us now today, this Palm Sunday, imagine how we too can boldly build our city to come, one for which we are willing to stand up. Let us think about our cities—perhaps Amman, Jordan, a different city with a hill, and see the Iraqi’s living in exile in Amman Jordan- hundreds of thousands of them- and in Syria. How might we live now today, so that they too can one day re-enter their home in the city of Baghdad and enter in *triumph*? What would the symbols of resistance be today if a procession entered the city of Baghdad? Would the hum-vee’s that patrol the streets be turned in to housing units? What would the Israeli tanks become that cut across the olive farms in Palestine? Or what common symbols might we use to show our resistance? I am grateful that so many people have been using their bodies to enter the Congressional offices to say that they will not support more funding for war in Iraq and in Afghanistan.

For what can we do so that our U.S. military soldiers coming back from Iraq, maimed and terrorized, can re-enter life in the states with the care they need such that they might even *begin* to triumph over what they have lived through? How might we offer sanctuary here to our brothers and sisters who are not documented according to the rule of empire, but work long and hard and honestly, but are getting raided at work and then overnight have been thrown out of their livelihood?

Might that we be able to one day together enter the city to come together in triumph?! May we not be overly eager to jump to Easter Sunday after we wave our palms. The way that people went in to Jerusalem in spirited resistance is a lot like what we heard Friday night here from the group “Emma’s Revolution”... who sang the lines that they saw on placards in a big public protest in DC—a *parade* for justice, if you will- to end the war on Iraq.<sup>3</sup> Have you had their brilliant song running through your head too? “Who lies? Who dies? Who pays? and Who Profits?” This may be what people were willing to ask in Jerusalem as they lined up behind someone who thought that the wealthy had better not covet their riches... who might say today that the Halliburton’s and Bechtels are not the leaders to follow. Folks entering Jerusalem said in fact we will follow one who rides on a *donkey* of all things —the one who works from a very different mindset- the one who is willing to have the last be first and the first be last.

So as we enter Holy Week, let us turn our hearts again to Jerusalem, to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ... so that united with faithful all over the world, we may one day enter in triumph, in to a city we are building, not one made only by human hands, but a new Jerusalem, where Christ lives and leads from the Holy Spirit, of the generous and abundant creator God. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Musical group *Emma’s Revolution* performed at Wellington Ave UCC on March 29, 2007. See [www.emmasrevolution.com](http://www.emmasrevolution.com)