

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

When I was in high school and discovering popular music, two of my favorite bands were Kansas and ELO – the Electric Light Orchestra. I think I gravitated toward them because in addition to the standard rock instruments – guitars, drums, and keyboards they had strings. Kansas had a violin, and ELO had violins and cellos. And as a cello player, I thought that was pretty cool. Anyway, I only bring this up because of an album cover. Kansas had one album called “Point of Know Return,” and the cover of that album showed an old sailing ship about to sail off the edge of the earth. It’s right at the tipping point, about to go over. I was reminded of that this past week when the first picture of a black hole was made public, and on one of the radio shows I listen to someone remembered Stephen Hawking’s explanation of what it would be like near a black hole. He compared it to being in a boat on the river just above Niagara Falls. While you are still in the river away from the edge of the falls, you can paddle yourself away from the edge and back upstream. It might be really hard, but you can do it. But once you’re at the edge, he said, it’s too late. Nothing you can do will prevent you from going over the falls, and no matter how hard you paddle on the way down, you’re simply not coming back up.

The event we commemorate today on Palm Sunday, Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, is Jesus’ point of no return in his earthly ministry. Ever since the midway point of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus has been headed to Jerusalem in order to be handed over and put to death. Up until now, he could, presumably, have turned back at any point, gone back up to Galilee, and probably have lived a fairly normal life. After his entry into Jerusalem, especially given the way he chose to do it, there is no turning back. The boat is over the edge of the falls, if you will. He is committed. He has reached his point of no return.

There are three things that I want us to notice in the Gospel reading today that will get us ready for the rest of Holy Week and Easter. First, Jesus knows what he’s getting himself in to,. Second, he is a legitimate threat to the powers that be. And third, he will not be silenced or deterred from his mission.

Let’s take these one by one. First, Jesus knows what he is doing here, and he means to do it. Jesus has been in and out of Jerusalem any number of times before, and each time he did so by walking in like most everybody else, we may assume. This time, his choice to ride in on a donkey is a signal to his followers that he is the Messiah, the expected king that God would send to restore the kingdom of Israel. The Romans wouldn’t have gotten that signal, but his own people would. They would have been familiar with the prophecy in Zechariah, “behold, your king comes to you... humble and riding on a donkey.” But when the crowd begins chanting and calling Jesus king, well the Romans certainly got the point then. Earlier in Luke we heard the Pharisees come and tell Jesus to run away because Herod was looking for him to kill him, and Jesus responded that he could not be killed outside of Jerusalem. Now this is coming to pass. This is Jesus doing what Paul describes in our Philippians reading, or probably to be more precise, what Paul quotes from an early Christian hymn, describing how in his incarnation Jesus willingly gave up his divine power and prerogatives, emptied himself of any sense or appearance of superiority, and willingly gave his life for the sake of the world.

Second, Jesus is a threat to the powers that be. Here in the crowd of followers it seems like the threat is an immediate political one. With all these people calling him king, who knows what could happen next. A riot? A coup? That may have been what the Romans were thinking.

And that's what the Pharisees are worried about. They don't want Jesus to provoke the Romans - to poke the bear, as it were. From the Roman point of view, Jesus and his followers look like one more potential Jewish rebellion in the making. But as we know, that's not what happens. Instead, some of Jesus' own people, particularly the religious establishment, will collaborate with the Romans to do the absolute worst thing in their power to a would-be king: put him to a cruel, painful, and humiliating death. And Jesus will not resist it. He will endure it. And, remarkably - - - he will not be defeated. The real threat is to be found elsewhere, in the story of his death and resurrection that will spread like wildfire throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. The Roman Empire is now long gone. The message of the gospel continues to do its work.

And that leads directly to the third thing: Jesus will not be silenced or deterred from his mission. The Pharisees want him to be deterred, though. They want him to silence the crowd and end this disturbance, to stop giving the Romans a pretext to further suppress and brutalize their people. And even though the crowds will soon turn against him, and the immediate political threat that the Romans are worried about will quickly dissolve, Jesus' threat to the powers of sin, death, and evil - the powers that would divide and conquer, that would separate people from God and from one another - that threat will not be diminished. In spite of all appearances to the contrary, those powers are being conquered through Jesus death and resurrection. And the message of that victory will not be silenced either. Those who follow Jesus will spread that message to the ends of the earth.

All three of these things have direct significance for us as we enter into the central mystery of our faith this week and as we endeavor to live out our faith in the days, months, and years to come. First, we should be confident that Jesus knows what he is doing even now as he entrusts the saving message of his gospel to the likes of you and me. It's no accident. He's doing this on purpose. He means for us to be his ambassadors and heralds. Second, we should recognize that the gospel that we bear is a real threat to the powers that be - the political powers, the economic powers, and all the other coercive powers that dominate everyday life. Not by inciting a violent uprising, or using the coercive powers for our own goals. But by exposing the false promises and premises of those powers and aligning us with the kingdom of love, mercy, and righteousness that Jesus is bringing to pass. And Third, we should be confident that Jesus will not be silenced or deterred from his mission even now, even when a throng of loud voices uses his name as a cover for their own agendas and perverts the gospel into a parody of itself. Even as churches close and many are alienated from the faith, God will not give up on the mission to save us from sin, death, evil, and ourselves. Let us enter into this Holy Week confident in these things, and confident that the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.