

AT A DISTANCE

A Palm Sunday Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Luke 19:29-40 (Luke 18:9-14)
 Luke 22:54, 23:44-49

April 13, 2025

Today's Palm Sunday story is a familiar one, and like usual, we find Jesus seated on top of a colt. Elsewhere, this colt is more specifically described as a young donkey. The procession begins in Bethany where his friends, Lazarus, Martha and Mary lived. Bethany is about two miles east of Jerusalem and located among the slopes of the **Mount of Olives**. The Mount of Olives is a mile-long ridge running north to south that overlooks Jerusalem on its eastern side. (I took this picture of the Mount of Olives from the top of Jerusalem's wall when I was in the Holy Land in 2022; the Garden of Gethsemane is towards the bottom right in the picture). Being that the Mount is characterized by rocks and slopes, the colt was young, and Jesus was a full-grown man, I imagine **the procession** from Bethany to Jerusalem was a slow one. Before the city is even in sight, we are told that Jesus is surrounded by a "*multitude*" (Luke 19:37) of walking disciples. Some in the crowd lay their cloaks down on the road before Jesus. Other gospel accounts say that people in the crowd wave palm branches and lay some of them down on the road as well. As the procession begins its Mount of Olives descent, the city comes into view and the excitement rises higher. The crowd is heard praising God, "**Joyfully with a loud voice**" (Luke 19:37). They yell out, "**Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!**" (Luke 19:38).

There's nothing quite like a parade, and that's basically what we have here. A parade is an occasion to meet up with friends and neighbors; a time to feel a sense of community solidarity. Of course, the main purpose of going to a parade is to see whatever and whoever is going passing by. Whether it's a float, a fire-engine, a performing band, a celebrity or political figure, you always want to get a good view. So, you get there early, and you find a good place right along the side of the road. Perhaps you set up your chairs or "save" that space in some other way for those who will join you to watch the parade. After all, why go to a parade if you can't see anything.

The people who gathered along the road from Bethany to Jerusalem were there because they wanted to see one person in particular. They came out to get a glimpse of Jesus, the prophet, the miracle worker, the rumored Son of God and Messiah. I imagine fathers with children on their shoulders. I imagine some pushing as people tried to squeeze their way closer to the front. Like most people who find themselves in the presence of someone important, they each wanted to get as close to Jesus as possible. They didn't want to miss anything. They wanted to see everything Jesus did and hear everything he said, and they couldn't do that if they were standing at a distance.

So, they got close, close enough to hear what they thought might be the greatest speech they had ever heard – a speech such as, "People of Jerusalem," I have come to get rid of all the foreign soldiers occupying this city. Be assured

that I am going to send them right back to Rome, where they belong. I will then make sure that your taxes are lowered, and better paying jobs are created. I will clean-up and beautify this great city of Jerusalem, so that it will once again be the envy of the world, like it was in the days of King Solomon. And with God's help, this city will once again be a safe and secure place to bring up godly children without fear."

So, people did what they could to be close. But by the time the procession ended those excited, gathered people had neither heard the great speech they wanted to hear, nor had they seen what they thought would unfold when they came out that day. Jesus did not make a speech about the Roman occupation forces getting booted out of Jerusalem. He did not "rally the troops" to take a stand against the occupying Roman troops. Instead, he shockingly drove out those who were selling things in the temple courtyard, and he told parables that only increased the anger of the chief priest, scribes and Pharisees against him. So, those who tried to get as close as possible to Jesus along the parade route quickly backed away as the events of Holy Week unfolded. In fact, some of those waving palm branches would soon shout, "*Crucify him!*" (Luke 23:21). And even Jesus' closest friends would distance themselves.

When Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane and led away to die, we are told that Peter, the leader of the disciples, "the rock," followed, but only "***at a distance***" (Luke 22:54). While Jesus was being beaten and interrogated in the home of the Caiaphas, the chief priest, Peter cowered around the fire in the courtyard, warming himself and denying Jesus three times. Of course, it could be said that at least he was within the general vicinity, which is more than can be said for the other disciples. Yet Peter's distance is still tragic considering his bold, confident boasting a little earlier that evening when he was in the upper room and eating the Passover dinner with Jesus and the other disciples. At that time, he said, "***Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!***" (Luke 22:33). Yes, unlike the other disciples, Peter followed, but after Jesus' arrest, he followed only "*at a distance.*"

Luke says that as Jesus was crucified, "***all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things***" (Luke 23:49). They were there and yet did not get too close. Perhaps it was because a man they cared about and who had already been horribly beaten was now dying an agonizing death right before their eyes. Most people would likely stand back from such an awful thing. Of course, we also have to remember that women in those days were conditioned to follow at a distance. They were told from the time they were born that they shouldn't get too involved in things – especially not public matters.

Like Peter and the women and the other acquaintances, and perhaps even the many others who were so far away that they weren't even in the picture, we know something about keeping our distance from Jesus. For truth be told, we follow, but not too closely. Sometimes that distance is the result of fear – fear of consequences and sacrifice. Jesus told us, "***If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me***" (Mark 8:34). Yes, we know Lord but forgive us if we like Peter prefer to

follow *at a distance*. After all, there are places you go, Lord, and people you touch, and things you say that cause us to pause and make us uncomfortable, so we prefer to keep some distance between ourselves and you.

You knew the joke was inappropriate and not at all funny. Moreover, you knew it was wrong, unchristian. Yet you said nothing. You let it pass. Others were standing there. You don't want them to think you're a fanatic, too pious or something. You want to fit in, so you choose to follow "*at a distance*." You knew that cheating was wrong – not the right thing to do, not what Jesus would do. And yet, you were under a lot of pressure to do well. But you're not going to do it on a regular basis, so you convince yourself that it's okay this time. You follow "*at a distance*." You knew what you did was mean-spirited, even cruel. Jesus would never have said or done something like that to someone else. But you did it, and you're not about to apologize and admit that you were wrong. You follow "*at a distance*." You see something important that needs done, a person who needs help, but you don't have time, or you just don't want to get involved. You follow "*at a distance*."

On Sunday morning during worship or perhaps during our quiet times with the Lord during the week, we want nothing more than to be close to him – to see him, to know him, to hear every word he has to say. But then at other times we step back and create a distance. It's often fear. And certainly, the events of Holy week as well as the daily sacrifices Jesus calls his disciples to as part of our daily walk with Christ can produce concern and even fear. And so, in response to the discomfort we feel, we choose to follow "*at a distance*."

But Luke also reminds us of another reason why people hesitate getting close to Jesus. Sometimes, it's our sin, our sense of unworthiness that leads us to stop at a distance. For thirty-four days, we have been walking through Lent, and we have been challenged to see ourselves honestly. We are sinners; we miss the mark; we fall short, sin, screw up. Before the unrestrained love and goodness of Jesus, we stand back. **"Go away from me, Lord, I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8)** cried Peter, one day when the grace and power of Jesus Christ were made particularly vivid to him. And well we should all cry out! Before the imposing, "no bounds" love of God, we are all unworthy. Even the very best of us, stand "*at a distance*" – realizing like John the Baptist that we are **"not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals" (Mark 1:7)**.

But thanks be to God for those times when Scripture makes it clear that "*at a distance*" means something very different. In these places the distance is not the very apparent gap between our sin and God's holiness, our fears and God's call – it is instead a distance that is bridged by a God who is determined to be close to us no matter how much distance we have established. We all know Luke's story of the prodigal son; I just preached on that parable two Sundays ago. In that parable, Jesus said that the father was waiting for the son and when he saw him "*at a distance*," he ran as fast as he could and embraced his son. Yes, we may try to keep our distance; we may allow our fears and our sense of unworthiness to control our hearts and minds, and to determine what we will do and where we will stand in relation to Jesus. But God has also shown us his

unrelenting determination to bridge that distance, the distance that we have created.

This week ahead, we will once again be reminded of the lengths with which our God was willing to go to come close to us and love us. **As Jesus stretches out his arms on the cross**, we see the very costly nature of God's love. Jesus came to us because we could not eliminate the distance ourselves. In fact, we have a tendency in daily life to make the distance even greater. But Jesus reaches out across the gap, the gap of our cowardice, our unworthiness, name it as you will – it is the great gap, the chasm that our fear and our sin create. But Jesus reaches out, determined to bring us close to the Heavenly Father.

On this Sunday morning, we began our service with a parade. And like those gathered along a parade route, there was excitement, and we wanted to be close to Jesus. But the parade is over; the crowd has dispersed. It is now the cross standing before us and even from this distance our eyes can see Jesus. As we look to the cross of Jesus' suffering and death, the distance between each one of us and Jesus is clear. But know that the distance is not God's desire.

And so, I encourage you to move ahead, into this week we call Holy. I invite you to follow Jesus by joining me for Maundy Thursday worship. At that time, we will gather with Jesus for a Last Supper remembrance; we will go with Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane, the judgment hall, and Golgotha's hill; we will stay with Jesus as he dies for all of us who tend to stand "*at a distance*." As we commit ourselves to following Jesus, let us also be thankful for God's love – a love that reaches across the distance created by our fear and our sin. Amen.