

March 20, Liturgy of the Palms: Luke 19:28-40

by [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#) in the [March 2, 2016](#) issue

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I run a number of races each year, many of which begin in the chill of early morning. Event organizers encourage people to wear old clothing over their race clothes while they're waiting for the gun to go off; anything cast off along the course is donated to a local charity. It normally takes a mile or so to warm up, so racers spend the first several minutes dodging old sweatshirts and stretched-out kneesocks used as arm warmers.

I always think about the streets of Jerusalem, littered not with runners' secondhand clothing but with the cloaks of everyday people, come to see Jesus. In Luke's Gospel, there's nary a palm in sight; people spread their cloaks on the road instead. When this text comes around in the lectionary, my friends and I make preacher jokes about celebrating Cloak Sunday.

There's no evidence the people knew Jesus was coming and were waiting for their chance to disrobe for the Messiah. If there were, it would take something away from the reckless abandon of the gesture—these are not carefully considered cast-offs. Jesus is a different kind of messiah than people were expecting. He comes riding on a donkey, not a mighty war horse. His crown will be made of thorns, not jewels. His kingdom is marked by justice, not opulence.

He's a movement leader who wisely doesn't do all the work himself. At the beginning of the story, Jesus sends two disciples to fetch the colt. But he doesn't lead them to the spot. He doesn't even point them toward a place they've recently visited: *I think I saw a colt back there a few days ago; that'll work*. Instead he sends them to the village up ahead, a place they haven't been before.

And Jesus doesn't lead the throng into Jerusalem, riding out front with everyone trailing behind him. Perhaps he's in the middle of a crowd of admirers. But from the way Luke tells the story, it seems like he's bringing up the rear. How can you throw your cloak on the road for Jesus unless you're ahead of him? I picture these crowds and I hear John the Baptist's admonition, way back in the beginning of Jesus'

ministry, to “prepare the way of the Lord.” It took them awhile, but it looks like they’re finally ready to take up the call.

Jesus’ ministry has been punctuated by his invitation to “come, follow me.” And many do follow, swept along in the wake of the one who will preach, teach, heal, exorcise, exasperate, and inspire. But here, as his ministry approaches its culmination, it’s the disciples and the crowd who are out ahead, and he’s the one following. The Pharisees see it, too; for months they’ve been tut-tutting Jesus—what he does, how he does it, when he does it, and with whom. Now it’s the crowd they want to stop at all costs.

Sometimes we follow Jesus from behind. We can see him clearly; we know we’re on the right path. But sometimes Jesus is in our rearview mirror, gesturing at us to go. It takes faith to follow Jesus. It takes very deep faith to go ahead of him into unknown territory. For this moment at least, the crowd exemplifies what Eugene Peterson calls “a long obedience in the same direction”—a discipleship that’s oriented toward the reign of God, even when Jesus isn’t out front showing the way.

This winter I’ve been thinking about the plight of the homeless in our cities—especially here in the District of Columbia, which was hit by massive snowstorms in January. My children were delighted by the feet of snow, having duly recited all the traditional incantations, their pajamas on backward. But I can’t get out of my mind a memory of walking with a professor friend after lunch on a cold day. A homeless man approached us and asked for change. I started in on my embarrassed half-shuffle, shaking my head no and mumbling something inadequate. If only the stones had shouted out in my stead.

My friend, however, stopped in her tracks, dug into her purse, and handed him some cash. It was reflexive, not a considered response. There was no weighing whether she had money to spare, or whether he looked trustworthy, or whether she was in the mood to be encountered by this man. He might as well have said, “The Lord needs it.”

I’m not interested at this moment in a treatise about the ethics of giving money directly to the homeless rather than to the agencies that work with them. I’m interested in a long obedience in the same direction. Here is a person who has been captivated by Jesus so deeply that certain actions become reflexive—like throwing cloaks on the road and bursting into Jerusalem with big news.

Preachers often struggle with Palm Sunday. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem gets relegated to the call to worship and a festive hymn or two, usually with palms waving awkwardly in the air and maybe kids using them to hit younger siblings. By sermon time, we've shifted our focus solidly to the cross.

Such short shrift is unfortunate. Palm Sunday is about more than a parade. It's about what Peterson calls the "livability" of scripture. Here are two disciples, sent into a town where they aren't known, hoping they don't get tarred as donkey thieves. Here are crowds, making themselves vulnerable, out ahead of Jesus where there's nowhere to hide. Here is loud boisterous testimony of God's deeds of power, so powerful that it makes the Pharisees desperate to silence it. Maybe we should dwell longer on this scene.