

“Lent in Plain Sight: Coats”

Luke 19:28-40

Service of Palms

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‘As Jesus rode along, the people kept spreading their cloaks on the road.’

- Luke 19:36

Pray of Preparation

O Lord, may we hold nothing back from you in our attempt to share in the celebration and remembrance of the passion of your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Message

There is nothing like a road trip to remind you that you are not in control of a great deal that happens in this life. Getting stuck in London was not on my itinerary. It was not part of the plan, as we might say.

Though I love to travel, and though I believe visiting other places play a vital role in our education, I have my limitations too. No one plans on getting sick or whatnot. But contingencies do happen!

Peggy and Grace, and apparently many others from Franklin, also realized this point over spring break coming back from Florida: when the airlines don't run on time, or when they don't run at all, plans change!

Indeed, during such moments, we recognize that life does come with a menu of challenges, and we realize we are not in control the way we think are. Indeed, we come to see – hopefully – that there are such things as dependency and interdependency on God and others. We can't really go it alone.

We really do count on the prayers of other people. And we really do count on the kindness of strangers and the help of friends. And we really do count on wisdom or inspiration from God to assess what we can and can't do as we take the steps we need to take.

To be sure, during my time in London, there were moments when I wished I could have just clicked my “ruby red slippers” and come home! But life doesn’t work that way. I wasn’t in Kansas anymore!

The Uncontrollability Factor

And yet, since I had time on my hands in London, I was able to read and pray and do some work. In fact, I came across one book by a German sociologist with the title *The Uncontrollability of the World*.¹

Its basic point is that over the last three hundred years we modern folks have done our best to try to master the world, from the Industrial Revolution to the rise of digital technology, to science, to warfare – we have this desire to control our environment, to dictate the political process, to develop ways of making sure we predict outcomes. Some of our efforts have produced incredible breakthroughs in health to bring hope; but other efforts have only brought about the opposite effects, creating a sense of dread about what we can do to the planet, not to mention to each other.²

In other words, our attempts to conquer and subdue the world can backfire. We buy into the myth that technology will solve our problems only to realize we have a new set of problems. We think life will be easier for us, only to discover we can become addicted to the very technologies we think will grant us more freedom; not always understanding that the more options we have before us often means the more stress we have, all the while the pace of our lives seems only to accelerate, which they are.³

And it all comes at a huge price – physically, mentally, emotionally, economically, politically, spiritually. It’s a beast we continue to feed thinking at some point it won’t eat anymore; but it just keeps on consuming. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how we gain control of such an “uncontrollable” world, if we even think we can, or what that even means. If anything, over the last two years, the pandemic has shown us that we are not in control the way we think we are.

To be sure, we can do what *we* can. We can work to influence folks in our neck of the woods, so to speak, but we can’t control the behavior of others. We

¹ Hartmut Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World* (New York, NY: Polity Press, 2020).

² Ibid., 12-14.

³ Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015).

can't control what they think or what they say. We can only do what we can do, which we shouldn't underestimate.

The paradox is what can happen when we remain open to God and to what God can bring to us in the midst of it all. We can come to see, in a strange way, how real God is, and how God can surprise us, even how God can send people to us to assist us, often without us knowing it at the time (Heb. 13:1). God can provide ways amidst the confusion.

Yes, we can certainly respond to such moments of uncontrollability in fear, which many do; or we can very much hunker down in anger and defensiveness, which can happen; or we can become frustrated and cynical, as many are these days. But in reacting these ways, there is no transformation. We lose sight of another "more excellent way" of courage and faith, of gratitude and joy, of love and compassion, which, during such times, seems counterintuitive, out of sync. Not what we expect.

Holy Week: Jesus Uncontrollable

And yet, if I understand the gospel, that's exactly the point. It is what Holy Week is all about: Jesus is out of sync with the violence, the deceit, the anger, the hypocrisy, the attempts to tame and control.

In Holy Week, Jesus exposes it all: our sinfulness, or the ways we try to keep it all under wraps. It is why "control" is not a good way to comprehend Holy Week, as Jesus shatters it – this alliance between Imperial Rome and Jerusalem religious power. There are no safe harbors for playing it safe or holding back. Indeed, if you want to play it safe with your faith, or hold back, then you probably don't want to participate in Holy Week, as the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is fraught with the uncontrollable and the unpredictable.

Holy Week marks Jesus' final week on earth, and in Luke's account we need to pay attention to what he is saying and doing. We need to understand from the Parade of Palms to the cross how Jesus is taking center stage, which means we are not going to control him; as Luke says earlier in his Gospel, when Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem, when he decides at that moment he is going to go to the cross (9:51), we can't stop him. We can only choose to follow him, or not.

Secondly, Jesus' entrance into the Holy City brings to the surface the expectations of the crowds, the disciples, and the religious and political rulers of the day. And though we call this the Parade of Palms, you will notice that in Luke's

version people are not Palm Branches; instead, they are placing their coats and cloaks on the ground as Jesus and the donkey pass over them (19:35). In Luke's Gospel, we might want to call this a parade of coats and cloaks, as the people welcome Jesus as their king (19:38). As he receives the royal coat treatment!

But it is enough to unnerve his critics, such a political demonstration. After all, the people are shouting, "Blessed is the *king* who comes in the name of the Lord!" (19:38). That's right, they are calling Jesus a king! There is a new ruler in town. And his opponents can see how they might be losing control. Hence their outburst to Jesus: "Tell your disciples to keep quiet! Stop all this praise. Tone down the joy" (19:39).

The Celebration of the Palms is one of the few times during the year when God expects us to shout and sing and praise the Lord! No need to lower our voices today! No, no! Let everyone say, Amen! Let that "inner Pentecostal" come out!

Hence Jesus' remarks to Pharisees, to the preachers of his day: "Listen, I am not going to tell these folks to be quiet. It is not going to happen. No, if these disciples are silent, the very stones would shout out" (19:40). In other words, Jesus says, "Stop thinking that you can control what is going on here because just when you think you can, God will prompt the very creation to sing."

How is that for a comeback? It is as if Jesus is saying, who do we think we are to keep the truth under cover? We can't.

The question is whether we are going to take part in the way he redeems this world, or not. That's what he's waiting on, for us to decide. If so, we need to take off our coats and place them on the ground before him.⁴

What's holding us back? I mean, here we are with Lent in Plain Sight, and there is this invitation to respond. The parade goes by, with Jesus on a donkey, and the people are laying down their coats and cloaks before him, celebrating his kingship, which they don't quite understand yet, but which they nevertheless respond to with joy – humble as he is to those who follow and threatening as he will become to those in power.⁵

Do you take off your coat and place it on the ground before him to pass over, or not?

⁴ Jill J. Duffield, *Lent in Plain Sight* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2020), 140.

⁵ *Ibid.*

It's a decision we are called to make in this life. It is a decision within our control.

After all, I assume, you have a coat, right? In fact, I assume you have several coats. Do you need them all? I know I don't. I looked in my closet this week, and this is what I saw: High School Letter Jacket. Two UE Letter Coats. Raincoat. Fall Coats. Winter Coat. Spring Coat. Why all the coats? Why am I holding on to them? What if the Lord needs them?⁶

Indeed, I wonder what else you and I might be holding on to that the Lord needs to fulfill his mission? Generous heart? Kindness? Devotion? Wisdom? Faith? Commitment? Love?⁷

Because the paradox is that if we don't share it, or give it, or sing it, someone else will, and if that someone else won't, then God's own creation will speak out and find a way to witness to Christ, to complete the mission!

Hence the invitation to not hold back, but to take part, to join the parade, to celebrate, coats and all. To share and sing praises to our king, Jesus Christ! Amen.

⁶ Ibid., 140.

⁷ Ibid., 141.