

PEACE IN HEAVEN

Luke 19

Iowa State basketball was rock bottom last year—2-22! No conference wins! Even with a new coach, no one expected anything this year. Then they came out like gang-busters going undefeated in non-conference play, even beating ranked teams and getting into the top ten. They did it in a way our teams used to, the style of high octane offenses like we had with coaches like Johnny Orr and Fred Hoiberg never did before, by playing tough defense. Who would have thought it possible? Then they hit the conference schedule and began losing close games. Then they lost by bigger margins. Their defense was still good, but the team could not shoot. After all the hopes had gone up, then a collapse.

Then they got into the NCAA tournament because of all the top teams they beat in the early season. They won a close game, and then upset Wisconsin the second round in part because the Wisconsin point guard got hurt. But by the third round, they lost to Miami.

But that can seem like nothing compared to the “collapse” Jesus seems to have during the first Holy Week. He enters Jerusalem to cheering crowds. Here He has come from a small village in Galilee in the north of Palestine, rather than in the south near Jerusalem where you would expect a Jewish leader to come from. He has no political power, no wealth, no army, just the following of people from among the common folk. He has caused quite a rush after doing miracles like giving sight to a man named Bartimaeus in Jericho and bringing Lazarus back from the dead. Jerusalem is packed with Jews from all over the world as they celebrate the Passover. Many of these people are from Jesus’ home area of Galilee. Some of them may have had a relative healed by Him. Some may have heard His sermon on the mount. Some might have been fed along with the 5,000. He comes to Jerusalem from the east, the direction the promised one, the “Messiah,” is supposed to come from. And He is riding on a donkey just as described by the prophet Zechariah. He seems to be at the pinnacle of success. Just give the word and the crowds will start the revolution to overthrow the hated Romans.

He goes into the temple that day and clears out all who were selling animals and changing money. On Monday and Tuesday He goes in and out of the temple teaching the people and confounding His enemies. But then He lays low outside of Jerusalem on Wednesday, goes quietly into Jerusalem on Thursday, eats the Passover with His disciples, and then goes out late at night to an isolated place, Gethsemane, outside the city where His enemies can arrest Him, bring Him secretly into Jerusalem, try him, and bring Him at first light to the Roman governor. He is then condemned to death and led out Friday to be crucified. He dies and is buried before the sun goes down. He seems to fall faster than Iowa State basketball.

This year our account of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday is from Luke. He states many of the same things as the other Gospels about the crowds welcoming and riding on a donkey. But unique to Luke is what the crowds shout out. “Blessed is the king who comes

in the name of the Lord!” That sounds like what we hear elsewhere. But there is the statement, “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” That is only in Luke.

“Glory in highest,” is heard elsewhere in Luke. It is the proclamation of the angels to the shepherds as the news is spread of Jesus’ birth on Christmas. Then the angels also add, “Peace on earth.” But here the crowds on earth sing, “Peace in heaven!” “Peace on earth” makes sense when we think that God sent His Son, Jesus, into the world to bring God’s blessings to this world. But what does it mean to have “peace in heaven”?

Jesus is entering Jerusalem where the temple of God is. The temple was seen as the physical place where God encountered humans. To go to the temple is considered by Jews the closest place where you can get to God on earth. But that connection had been weakened by the idolatry of the people in the Old Testament. In punishment for that God had allowed the Babylonians to destroy the temple and capture the Ark of the Covenant, which was God’s throne on earth. Later the temple was rebuilt, but the Ark was no more. Jewish people were looking for a promised one from God who would free them from foreign oppression and fully restore the link with God—to pave the way for a complete link with God in heaven—thus “peace in heaven.”

That doesn’t happen. Instead the temple, though rebuilt magnificently by Herod, will be totally leveled by the Romans about 40 years later when the Romans will squash a Jewish revolt. It only will get worse as another revolt will be stopped about 60 years after that. The Jews will be expelled from Jerusalem.

It can seem like it won’t happen for us either. We can build dreams of a happy life, with a good marriage and children, a comfortable house, and many things to keep us entertained. Even if we don’t face any problems for so many years, aging and illness comes. Then death comes which cuts us off from all our loved ones. What kind of real peace is that?

When settlers first came to Iowa they established their farms along the rivers. It wasn’t just a matter of easy trade. From their background as farmer in the east and in Europe, they knew that if trees grew, you could grow crops. The vast grasslands of the Great Plains, which begin here in Iowa, were seen as part of what they called “The Great American Desert.” But when newer plows were developed which could turn over the heavy soil of the grasslands and people started to farm the grasslands, the “Great American Desert” turned into the best farmland in the world.

“Peace in heaven” looked dead as Jesus was arrested and crucified. But that apparent loss turns into something far greater than those people on Palm Sunday sing about. Jesus dies, but then He rises from the dead. The Romans are not overthrown, and people still suffer and die. But the source of all that pain and death, the sin that separates us from God, is nailed to the cross on Jesus where it can stay. The “peace on earth” that the angels sang about is the victory that Jesus wins for all and gives “peace in heaven” as Jesus leads our way to rising from the dead and being with God forever.

St. Paul tells us about God that He is “able to do far more than we ask or think.” What makes it hard for us to see God’s blessings is that we are so often looking for things that are far less than the blessings He offers to us. We are familiar with the older version of the angels’ song on Christmas when they sang, “Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth, goodwill to men.” The implication is that God will clean up our world a little bit and all will be fine. But the better translation is, “Peace on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests.” “Peace in heaven: does not mean that our world is cleaned up a little so that is okay to God. That is what the crowds on Palm Sunday thought. But we would still be slaves to an existence that leads to death. No, in Jesus, God would bring “peace in heaven” by presenting people to God forgiven and cleansed from sin, people who will be resurrected to a new world and a new life free from death.

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” That is the song the people sang as Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. What they didn’t know is what we know from the book of Revelation. In chapter 7 a great crowd no one can number also praises Jesus with palm branches in their hands. But this crowd is not in Jerusalem, but in heaven, part of the eternal worship of Jesus that we will partake of on that last day when we are raised from the dead. It is our assurance that what Jesus brings to us is far better than anything else we could want.