

Palm Sunday
April 14, 2019
The Rev. Dr. Dena Cleaver-Bartholomew

It amazes me to watch how we as a culture idolize people and then turn on them. Actors, politicians, music stars, entrepreneurs, and sports figures are portrayed in ways that are larger than life, are championed and adored by fans, and then face scorn or hatred when they disappoint us. When our lives are not going as we hoped, when the culture around us reflects values we do not share, and especially when we feel angry, hurt, or disempowered, we look to idealized others as our heroes, as the people who either live the lives we wish we had, or who can make our own lives better. Famous actors, music stars, and major athletes appear to be living the dream, embodying the life of fantasy, and carrying a lot of our expectations with them.

Politicians, though we have come to speak disdainfully of them, are intended to represent us. People take that representation very personally at times, knowing that politicians have actual power to affect our lives. Our next presidential election is not until November 2020, yet campaigning for the primaries has already begun and the intensity of emotion surrounding possible candidates is growing. People often identify closely and personally

with the candidate they believe will change the country to reflect the reality they want to see. Donald Trump, the current President and leading candidate for the Republican nomination, has evoked wave upon wave of passionate responses from supporters and detractors alike. Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and Pete Buttigieg—an Episcopalian who is very articulate about his faith—have all attracted both a committed following and a growing number of critics.

Given the powerful reactions to our current presidential candidates, perhaps it isn't a stretch to understand how the crowds on Palm Sunday could be hailing Jesus as king one minute and turning on him just a few days later. On Palm Sunday Jesus entered Jerusalem to cheering crowds who laid down palm branches and cloaks to make a royal way for him as they declared, **"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"** The Pharisees encouraged Jesus to stop the crowd from calling him king, as it raised dangerous questions. What kind of king did they mean? Was he the long awaited Messiah, the legitimate heir of the great King David, the one promised to restore Israel? Was he one of the rebel challengers to oppressive Roman rule who came to stir up trouble right before the Passover? Was this the overreach of a man with personal charisma and

devoted followers? One did not use the title king lightly in a land occupied by the Roman army, whose responses were known to be swift and harsh. The Romans crucified their adversaries, a unique form of public torture and execution intended to serve as a deterrent. We in Western culture are the descendants of the Romans, as is our form of Christianity, which was spread through Latin, the language of the Roman Empire. When it comes to our opponents, political or otherwise, we learned from our predecessors. We decry the lack of civility in public discourse, yet we must acknowledge the consistent and ugly undercurrent of vitriol and violence which surfaces at sporting events and political rallies. As religious historian Karen Armstrong observed: **“In our discourse it is not enough for us in the Western democratic tradition to simply seek the truth. We also have to defeat and humiliate our opponents.”**

It was not just the Pharisees who questioned the use of titles associated with Jesus. The chief priest and the scribes, Pilate, and Herod all asked if Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of the Jews. His reply was a non-answer: **“You say that I am.”** He was treated with contempt and mocked; yet he remained maddeningly silent. What are people to think of Jesus, who would not define himself according to the

titles people wanted to apply? I hear the echo of a foundational Bible story, the one in which Moses encountered a God who spoke out of a burning bush. When Moses asked God for a name God said, **“I AM WHO I AM,”** which is the ultimate non-answer. How do we respond to someone who might be king, who might be **God**, and who does not accept our neat categories or titles? Rainer Maria Rilke wrote:

**I am circling around God...
The word made him nervous. So he said,
...around the ancient tower,
and I have been circling for a thousand years,
and I still don't know if I am a falcon, or a storm,
or a great song.**

Uncertain about how to respond to Jesus, people circled around him until they made up their minds: Judas betrayed him. Peter denied him. The chief priest, the scribes, and most of the crowd demanded his death. Herod punted. Pilate could find no guilt but gave Jesus over to be crucified. The women wept. One criminal taunted him, as did the soldiers. The other criminal treated Jesus with respect. When Jesus died, darkness came over the land. The Centurion, the commanding officer of the Roman soldiers, recognized Jesus' innocence and praised God. The crowd lamented.

Through it all the women bore witness. Joseph of Arimathea requested the body of Jesus, wrapped it for burial, and placed it in his own tomb.

And we, what do we do when God disappoints us? When God is silent and does not answer our questions? When Jesus is not the kind of king we expected, wanted, or hoped for? How long do we circle, waiting to see how we should respond? Will we betray, deny, punt, cave, weep, show respect, be surprised, bear witness, or offer compassion? Might we do all of the above depending on the day? It is quite likely we will. Yet you and I have a hope that none of the people who stood before Jesus had. We know what happened on Easter. We know that even when we come up short in our responses to Jesus, he invites us to try again, to take another circle in our spiral of faith, and to see him with a new heart and fresh eyes. Jesus was the first to experience new life, yet it is a gift he offers us again and again.

Amen