**A Hero’s Welcome**

**Palm Sunday 2020**

**Matthew 21:1-11**

21When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2saying to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. 3If anyone says anything to you, just say this, “The Lord needs them.” And he will send them immediately.\*’ 4This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,
5 ‘Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
   humble, and mounted on a donkey,
     and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’
6The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; 7they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. 8A very large crowd\* spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,
‘Hosanna to the Son of David!
   Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!’
10When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’ 11The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’

In their book, The Last Week, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write that there were two processions into Jerusalem on that spring day. It was the beginning of Passover, the most sacred week in the Jewish calendar. In the centuries since, Christians have celebrated this day as Palm Sunday, the first day of Holy Week with its dismal climax of Good Friday. One was a peasant procession; the other an imperial procession.

The two processions are as different as the personalities of the two men who lead them. From the east Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered on by disciples and followers. Jesus had come from the peasant village of Nazareth and most of his followers came from the peasant class. On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Idumea, Judea and Samaria entered the city at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus’ procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilates proclaimed the power of the empire. Jesus came to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Pilate was in Jerusalem because it was standard practice for Roman governors of Judea to be in the Capital City for major Jewish festivals. They did so not out of respect for the religious tradition but to be in the city in case there was trouble. There was often trouble in Jerusalem during Passover because it celebrated the liberation of the Jewish people from another power; that of Egypt, and slavery to Pharaoh.

Pilate, like governors before him, did not reside in Jerusalem but in Caesarea Maritima, a new and splendid coastal city sixty miles to the west. It was a far more pleasant city in contrast to Jerusalem, which was inland, insular, provincial and partisan. Pilate and Jesus enter the city from opposite directions; both in Jerusalem for Passover; one to celebrate and the other as a symbol of authority and might. Their paths would cross and we will visit that encounter later in the week when we gather to contemplate Good Friday; but for today we ponder the differences between the two beginning with their respective entries into the city.

Pilate’s procession displayed imperial power. Pilate is probably on a valiant steed; Jesus astride a donkey. One is surrounded by pomp and circumstance; the other is met by a chorus of well -wishers who lay their cloaks before the donkey and wave branches from trees in welcome; the clip clop of the donkeys feet muted by the clothing and tree branches. Contrast this with the other procession: cavalry on horses; foot soldiers; armor, weapons, shields, beating drums, the flapping of flags and standards in the wind.

Perhaps there were those who greeted the governor and his entourage with acknowledgement, although it is hard to imagine a throng of locals shouting words of praise. Jesus’ procession countered what was happening on the other side of the city. A donkey. Some tree branches. Shouts of praise and blessing. Pilate’s procession embodied the power, glory, wealth, opulence and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus’ procession embodied the opposite: the peaceable kingdom of God rooted in compassion, forgiveness and equality. (The Last Week-Borg and Crossan- pages 2-5) It is striking in its differences.

Borg and Crossan’s imaginary reconstruction of two processions in very marked contrast is not biblically based but it does serve to illustrate the tensions and forces that form the backdrop to the story. As the week progresses the mighty will take on the perceived weak; the power of Rome will challenge the Kingdom of God; shouts of praise and blessing will transition to shouts for suffering death. There will be trouble and Pilate will need to exercise his politically instilled authority to keep possible insurrection at bay.

Palm Sunday has also been dubbed Passion Sunday because not everyone will attend a service of worship on Good Friday. It is possible to go from the glory of Palm Sunday to the glory of the resurrection and bypass Calvary altogether. But when we do that we miss the transformative power of resurrection. We must painfully make our way to the top of Calvary’s mount and sit at the foot of the cross if we want to truly understand and celebrate the power of the resurrection. This year, as we worship cloistered in our homes because of Covid-19 and gather around a computer screen or sit in an easy chair and read these words in hard copy, may mean that those who do not ordinarily worship on Good Friday may have the opportunity to do so in one’s own time. So I can make this time together more about triumph and only hint at pending tragedy because the foreshadowing of things to come is hinted at in Matthew’s account.

He writes that the city was “in turmoil”. There was confusion in some over who it was that entered the city astride a donkey and was greeted with messianic welcome. Surely this procession could not escape the notice of Rome or temple elite for long. There is a similar turmoil in cities across our country and in our world this Palm Sunday as we all continue to grapple with isolation and distancing because of a pandemic. There are those who may be feeling that we are daily-yea hourly-reminded of the gravity of the situation that grips the world and maybe it would be nice for the minister to not mention the source of our angst in a sermon.

Maybe in this sacred space of reflection and prayer we might appreciate an escape from the reality that grips. What a gift to spend several minutes in contemplation and not hear the pandemic referenced or be reminded of all of the rules that we must obey and the restrictions with which we live. And yet Jesus was never one to deny the reality that he and all Jews lived with: Roman occupation; rendering to Caesar and to God; two leaders arriving in Jerusalem for Passover and for very different reasons: one to worship and the other to exercise control. One to purge the temple of those who were using it for their own selfish purposes and the other to remind them of who was in charge.

Let me say that I am missing my interaction with my congregation. I miss the small talk and the banter at the start of the service; the hugs at the conclusion and staying abreast of the moments of your lives. But I am not about to throw caution to the wind or live in non-compliance as we all fend off Covid-19. A Florida minister has been arrested for holding large services of worship after large gatherings of people had been suspended. At a church service on March 15, the minister said he would not close his church's doors until the Rapture, when believers will be lifted up to heaven, according to evangelical theology. At the same service, the pastor said he won't close his Bible School either, "because we are raising up revivalists, not pansies."

To put hundreds of people at risk is irresponsible and begs the rhetorical question: Which procession is this individual marching in? The one with a man astride a donkey in the lead or that of the imperial bureaucrat astride the steed? The one who rides amid cries of “Hosanna” which is interpreted as “save now” or the one who lets symbols of wealth, power and threat do the talking for him? The one who represents God on earth or the one who symbolizes the power of Rome? The one who counseled that we are to be in the world but not of the world or the one who resorted to threat, violence and used power to control rather than liberate? We cannot authentically serve both so what will it be: The kingdom of God or the Roman Empire? The king on the donkey or the politico on the steed?

We have been making our way to Calvary in a very different way this year. We have not been in community and our pilgrimage has been more independent and perhaps even lonelier. There are fewer, figurative tree branches being waved and the street is not littered with cloaks. The entry this year may be less jubilant because the world is too much with us; there is turmoil in the city and in the world this Holy Week but the quieter less ecstatic entry is no less triumphant. Just as the power of Rome could not completely silence or quell the shouts of hosanna so too do we proffer up our prayers for saving in this challenging time.

May God bless us with patience to not lose heart or hope. May we be encouraged and empowered to carry on the journey from the glory of the triumphal entry, to the foot of the cross and to the glory of the resurrection. “Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in highest heaven!” Amen.