

## 4-5-20 Sermon "The Other Way"

When I was in high school I played trumpet in the band and every year at various times we would march in parades. We marched at Disney World on Main Street USA, we marched in the Pegasus Parade leading up to the Kentucky Derby in Louisville, Kentucky, and we marched in various local parades in Madison at Christmas and on July 4th. We marched in blistering heat and bitter cold - we marched when it was so windy that it literally blew the sound away as it came out of our instruments and other times when it was raining so hard you were sure that Noah's Ark had to be in the parade somewhere. And through all of those parades, all of that marching with 8 to 5 steps or 6 to 5 steps, and pinwheel turns, I came to learn this: I hate parades.

I used to watch the Thanksgiving Day parades when I was a kid to see the giant floats and watch the bands, but now they're just advertisements for the latest musicals or network TV shows, with lip-syncing singers and I'm just no longer interested.

In the book, *"The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem,"* the authors suggest an interesting idea about what was really happening in Jerusalem on the day that we have come to call Palm Sunday. "Two processions," they wrote, "entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year" that has become "the most sacred week of the Christian year."

"One was a peasant procession," they continued, while, "the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message

was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class..."

"On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire. These two processions embody the **central conflict** of the week that led to Jesus' crucifixion."

The authors, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, both biblical scholars of very different backgrounds, continue, saying, "Pilate's military procession was a demonstration of both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology. Though unfamiliar to most people today, the imperial procession was well known in the Jewish homeland in the first century. It was the standard practice for the Roman governor of Judea to be in Jerusalem for the major Jewish festivals, not out of reverence for the religious devotion of their Jewish subjects, but to be in the city to reinforce the Roman soldiers already stationed there in case there was trouble, and there often was, especially at Passover," when the celebration was about the Jewish people's liberation from an earlier empire, in Egypt.

Pilate's procession of imperial power was intended to produce shock and awe; cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold, the sound of marching feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the sound of hooves and chariots, the beating of drums. All of this would have been intended to display overwhelming power and would have elicited in some feelings of awe while in others... resentment.

But it was not just about imperial power, it was also about Roman imperial theology, which held that the Roman emperor was not simply the political and military ruler of Rome, he was also considered to be the only Son of God, the Lord and Savior, the one who brought peace on earth. So, for Rome's Jewish subjects, Pilate's procession embodied not only a rival social order, but also a rival theology.

Jesus' procession, on the other hand, taking place on the other side of the city is about something totally different. The gospel writer Mark tells us that Jesus' procession was planned ahead of time - he tells two of his disciples in advance to go to the next village and bring him a colt, a donkey they find there that had never been ridden. They do so, and Jesus rides on the donkey down the Mount of Olives into the city surrounded by a crowd of followers who spread their cloaks and leafy branches on the ground ahead of him and call out "Hosanna!" or, "Save Us!" as it is translated. Calling him "Son of David," meaning one like the great Jewish King David, they present a counter-procession to the imperial procession going on across town.

And the meaning of, the symbolism behind Jesus' procession and demonstration is clear - or would be clear to those in attendance - because Jesus intentionally uses imagery from the prophet Zechariah in the Hebrew Bible that all would have understood about the coming of a messiah king, riding down from the Mount of Olives on a donkey. Zechariah 9:10 says,

*"He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations."*

This king, riding on a donkey, will banish war from the land - no more chariots, no more war-horses. Commanding peace to the nations he will be a king of peace.

Jesus' procession deliberately countered, Borg and Crossan suggest, what was happening on the other side of the city. Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory, and violence of the kingdom of Caesar that ruled the world. Jesus' procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God. This contrast - between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar - is central not only to the gospel of Mark, but to the story of Jesus and early Christianity. The confrontation between these two kingdoms continues through the last week of Jesus' life on earth, ending with his execution. Holy Week is the story of this confrontation.

The Revised Common Lectionary provides for a choice on this Sunday - to celebrate either Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday. With Palm Sunday we focus solely on the events of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Passion Sunday moves quickly past that entry in an attempt to cover all of Jesus' passion in one service, assuming that most people will not participate in a Holy Week midweek service. It's expedient. But just as I don't like parades, I also don't like giving short shrift to Holy Week.

The gospel writers go to great lengths to share the story of what Jesus did, what he taught, and the dynamics of what happened with and around Jesus over the course of this most sacred of weeks, and the idea of trying to tie all of that up into one Sunday simply to potentially reach more people with that story on the Sunday before Easter than what might be reached on Thursday or Friday night is missing the point.

That said, these are not normal times - in the midst of pandemic we make adjustments. So, we will provide one Holy Week worship experience that will bring us into the

Passion of Jesus, but today we will focus on the passage at hand, the day at hand, and what this week calls us to do and to be. The final week of Jesus' earthly life is too demanding, too empowering, too challenging a message for us and to us to squeeze it into a "convenient" package, a two-for-one deal if you will, on Palm Sunday. We are called in the gospels and particularly in the season of Lent, to discipline, to take our time, to take in the story of Jesus - the teachings of Jesus - not to simply check them off some religious to-do list. Lent is a season of reflection, and this is a week of transformation for the disciples and Jesus' followers, as it is for Jesus, and as it is intended to be for us as well.

So, rejecting the Cliff's Note option for the week, we are jumping out of the parade of those who would condense the story and we are going a somewhat more traditional way and see how this way unfolds.

And what unfolds for us, is a choice. There are two processions, two parades, coming into Jerusalem, one about power, one about peace. And as Christians we would like to say we're all about peace - but as Americans, we have to understand that we're also all about power, all about empire. The United States is the most powerful earthly empire to ever exist. And this brings conflict for followers of the way of Jesus - or at least it should - because Scripture is nothing if it is not anti-empire. The Way of Jesus calls us to be witnesses to the peaceful kin-dom of God in how we live in a world that is often about power. The Way of Jesus is not the way of the world - it's the other way.

In our film, *The Way*, as we get to the end, as Tom has worked out his differences with his fellow travelers, as he has begun to embrace a way of living, a way of thinking, a way of being that is at least somewhat counter to everything he had

believed or experienced before, we see him and his companions making peace with God, with faith, with spirituality, and with one another in a couple of different ways. At the Cathedral of St. James, it is not Tom, the self-professed "non-practicing" Catholic who humbles himself by entering the sacred space on his knees, as Tradition calls for, but Jost from Amsterdam, the person who throughout the film has served as the glue that held the group together. In the cathedral, in the midst of experiencing the sacred ritual of incense, Tom again has visions of his son Daniel, as Tom in this moment becomes one with his son in ways that he has never done before.

And then as the four depart the cathedral, their journey along the Camino de Santiago complete, there is a knowing sense among them that they are not done - not with the journey and not with one another. Soon the four depart the cathedral and head to a city on the ocean, where Tom spreads the remaining ashes of his son into the sea, symbolically making him one with God and one with the world. And then, as the film concludes and the final credits prepare to roll, we see Tom, kerchief around his neck, backpack in place, as he has embraced the way of the traveler, the sojourner, the other way that his Son had tried to invite him into in life, but could only bring him into through death. Dying to an old way of being and being born or resurrected into a new way of being, IS the other way, it IS the Way of Jesus.

We find ourselves today in a world suspended in a state of fear and uncertainty. But it's not just because of Covid 19 or a pandemic - that just brings our fear to the surface and gives it a name. No, our fear is more deeply seated than that; when this pandemic ends the virus will be gone but the fear will continue. Why? Because at its root our fear isn't about disease, it's about the other. It's the fear of other

people who we think will bring us harm. A century ago the "others," if you will, were the Irish and the Catholics, in the middle of the century it was the Germans, the Japanese, and the Italians, after that it was communists, then it became Muslims, then immigrants, then the LGBTQ community. And throughout all of this time there has been the ongoing, persistent, and pernicious fear that is racism - what Jim Wallis calls "America's original sin." The powers that be, empire, whatever you want to call it, always manufacture a way to generate **fear of somebody** in order to maintain a grip on power.

The power of empire is stealthy, it's sly, it hides in plain sight, seeking to turn average people against one another other, creating situations of fear that it hopes will distract everyday people from what's really going on, or suggesting, amazingly, that only **the purveyors of empire** have the power or product or solution to end it - and they will gladly sell it to us if we will just drink their Kool-aid.

So, Jesus' procession into Jerusalem on this day about 2000 years ago or so, was more than just a nice, holiday parade. It wasn't a Soviet May Day Parade with tanks and missile launchers rolling down the street, or an American Independence Day parade, it wasn't even Santa Claus coming to town in a Christmas Parade. No, it was more like Martin Luther King marching in Selma, Alabama; more like that single person holding off a tank in Tiananmen Square in China; it more closely resembled Gandhi beginning a hunger strike than two corporate CEOs or politicians sitting down to a "power lunch."

And the people cried out "Hosanna!" - "Save Us!" as Jesus passed by on that donkey. I doubt that anybody called out those words to Pilate that day.

And even if they did, I doubt he would have heard their cries over the thunder of hoofbeats, chariots, and drums - of empire.

The choice I alluded to earlier seems, on the surface, to be a very simple one. Holy Week and the journey of Lent are about an alternative procession and an alternative journey. The alternative procession is what we see on Palm Sunday, an anti-imperial and non-violent procession. Now as then, the alternative journey is the path of personal transformation that leads to journeying on the way of Jesus. Holy Week, as the annual remembrance of Jesus' last week is about the Other Way, and it presents us with the always relevant questions: Which journey are we on? Which parade will we be a part of? We are all, by the nature of our culture and society, of our economy and our national pride, attracted to the imperial parade of tanks and chariots, banners and flags, marching bands, horses and cannons. But Jesus calls us to the alternative parade, to the Other Way.

Jesus calls us to a parade where the grand marshal rides, not on a war horse, but on a donkey; where palm leaves and cloaks are laid on the ground instead of imperial flags and war eagles being raised in the air. Jesus calls us to the kingdom of God, not to Empire, where peace on earth isn't enforced by military might or economic domination or where "might makes right," but rather where the wolf lies down with the lamb; a kingdom where the justice of God is about restoration and not retribution, and ensures that the social and economic systems are balanced; that everyone has enough; a world where there is no they, but only a unified us - beloved daughters and sons of God. That is where the parade of Jesus is leading us - and I LOVE this parade! So, the choice we face today, and every day is this: which parade will you be



in? Which way will you choose? The way of the world, or the  
Way of Jesus?  
Amen.