

April 14, 2019 Palm Sunday
Dr. Jane Florence
Title: "Two Parades"
Scriptures



Choir: O come, O Come, Emmanuel

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news, healing every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.... (Matt 9: 35) He healed the man with the withered hand and restored him to the community on the Sabbath... But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus. (Matt 12: 14)

Choir: Do you hear the people sing? ...

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet (Matt 22: 45)

Choir: Do you hear the people sing? ...

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them but do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie heavy burdens and put them on men's shoulders but they are not willing to lift a finger to help.... Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! Woe to you, blind guides! You fools! You snakes! You brood of vipers! Woe to you teachers and Pharisees, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you.... ... when he had finished saying these things, The Chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. .. But they feared a riot among the people."

Do you hear the people sing?

....

The next day the great crowd that had come for the feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the King of Israel!" Hosanna!" (John 12:12)

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and he began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves (for they were stealing from the poor and foreigners) The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching" Mark 11

Choir: King of Kings and Lord of Lords

Crowds welcome Jesus to Jerusalem. Men, women, children wave palm branches like balloons at a parade. They place their cloaks upon the ground. It's a parade of hope and anticipation. "Hosanna! Here comes the One who will change our lot in life. "

Historians tell us there were two parades in town that day. On the other side of town, there's a shiny one with brightly colored banners and lots of glitz and glam. There was a royal procession. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who was the local rep for occupation of Judea by the Roman Empire was entering town. As part of imperial theology, his parade proclaimed the ruler of Rome as the Son of God. Pilate was not riding a donkey; he would have entered the city with all the pomp and circumstance of a worldly military might. Rolling out chariots and weapons, marching soldiers shining helmets and sun glinting off sharpened swords, military flags and such. Some scholars propose that Jesus' procession was a deliberate nonviolent counter protest to the power, glory and violence of the empire that was devouring the world. Jesus enters humble on a donkey; he recreates the vision of the ancient Jewish prophet, Zechariah, who told of one coming in peace for the nations. There's a startling contrast between these two parading images. Pontius Pilate, representing the Roman Empire marches into town in military formation. This was a festival week in Jerusalem. There were people from all over who have come into the holy city for the celebration. There's nothing liked a parade of troops with shields, swords, and weapons of might to remind people who is in control.

It's a fantastic image. These dueling forces, the powerful and the peasants, marching towards one another; the stage is set for battle. Between these two, there is a little group caught in the middle, the religious leaders, Pharisees, scribes, and priests. On the one hand, they've made a deal with the Roman Empire. The priests promised to keep their people in check. They have agreed to tax the people-to support the occupying nation with the sweat of the poor. The religious leaders will be the 'peace keepers,' and Jerusalem will be spared destruction.

It's a tough place to live: owing homage to an oppressive world Empire of unsurpassed military might and owing allegiance to YHWH- God of justice for poor. This isn't a new situation that just arrives this week. It's been brewing for years. Do you hear the people; they've been 'singing' for years throughout the story of Jesus?

Jesus of Nazareth has been gathering momentum for some time. Right from the start, it seems he's been able to draw a crowd. He had a magnetism, a charisma, a Spirit that drew people. Jesus went from village to village in his travels. He avoided the big city. He stopped along fishing villages; he paused along village wells; he camped in the countryside. But in whatever out-of-the-way place he goes, crowds appear. There wasn't a PR blitz of billboards reading "Jesus is coming to Town". It was a grassroots movement of the people. One tells another and another and another. Word spreads, "Jesus is down by the lake! Let's go see." "Jesus is teaching on a grassy hillside! Let's go hear." "Jesus is staying at the house down the road! Let's go." People come. They've watched him heal. They've seen him feed multitudes. He brings out the best in folk. People just want to share when they are around him. He's a good guy, and he tells it like it is. When he preached to the poor out in the countryside, down on the dockside, the sick and lame banned from community; he drew quite a crowd. It was mostly the crowds of marginalized who would give him the cloak off their back and spread palm branches to welcome him as their KING. You can imagine Roman rule did not like that.

Jesus teaches the crowds of God's love, then points to the Pharisees lurking in the sidelines and says, 'don't be like them.' Jesus stirs up the folks with visions of God's reign on earth. Then he chastises the Pharisees. He called them Actors, Fakes, Hypocrites- a brood of vipers! to their faces. He says they are more interested in outward appearances than inner

character. They are more interested in keeping rules than caring for the needs of the people. Fools! Whitewashed tombs! Jesus might have calmed the sea and walked on water, but he also stirred up quite a storm.

That's just like a prophet. Speaking up for the poor, widows and orphans. Naming the injustice of the wealthy who take advantage of the marginalized. Calling leadership to account and casting visions of a new way, a different way of living, a godly way of the world. That's the prophet's job description.

There was Joseph and Moses. Hanani and Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Amos. Habakkuk. Zechariah. There was a long history of prophetic witness in Hebrew tradition, and there was a cultural awareness of the consequences of prophetic work. Luke tells us that Jesus lamented, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you."

Prophets get killed more often than not. The powers don't like it when someone is trying to upset the status quo. The crowds get excited. They sing a song of "Hosanna!" - Hosanna means Save Us!. The crowds who have been following Jesus are proclaiming him the long awaited Anointed One who will lead their nation back to glory. They are expecting that he is the one who will free them from the oppressive yoke of slavery to the Roman Empire. They are hoping for liberation, and they herald him their prophet and king. Do you hear the people sing? They are singing for liberation! Singing for a reversal of power! Singing of hope that they will not be slaves again!

Their voices are throughout the gospels. From the first week of Jesus' work to the last, read the gospels again. The crowds are there. Thousands gather to embrace the New Kingdom Jesus proclaims. The movement is growing. As the people gain strength and number, the religious leaders fear grows. The Pharisees and scribes and priests cannot contain them. Now the crowds are so bold to demonstrate in the streets of Jerusalem!

By the end of the week, this crowd is disappointed. The leaders have infiltrated the masses and sown seeds of discontent. Jesus did not take up the sword and lead a bloody revolution against the Empire like they had hoped he would. The crowd's song changes. It changes from the hope of "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who will save us!" to "Crucify!" Prophets get killed. It's a fact.

We've seen it: Abraham Lincoln, JFK, MLK Jr., Bobby Kennedy, Oscar Romero. People who try to make change on behalf of the poor put their lives on the line, and they do so knowing: prophets get killed. MLK Jr. painted a beautiful vision of hope. He shared a dream of justice, and he named the truth, "I've seen the Promise Land, I may not get there with you, but we ...will get there." When the crowds get excited, the Powerful get frightened. Prophets get killed. Everyone knows that. The scriptures tell us that Jesus was killed by human fear, and human insecurities, and human disappointment. That's what the gospels say. Did you hear the people sing?

That message got lost. I was reared with the theology that said, Jesus died because God needed to punish people for our sins. I was told God had to have a blood sacrifice in order to forgive us. I was told that a price had to be paid for my sins, and Jesus took my place on a cross meant for me. That theology teaches that God could only forgive when an innocent man was tortured. It's in some Christian doctrine; it's in many Christian hymns. It's in the movies about Jesus. It's an idea that developed in the 4th century- not the first.

The gospels of the first century teach Jesus was executed as a criminal in the manner of traitors to the Roman Empire. The early stories, the scriptures we heard today, told that the Pharisees were threatened by Jesus' popularity with the crowds. The crowds were gaining

momentum. The gospels tell that human fear and jealousy killed Jesus not a blood- thirsty God.

The passion story we hear in Holy Week- Thursday night and Friday night- is a story of a man passionate about a nonviolent loving God- not a torturous punitive God who killed a prophet of love and justice. This week is about what God does in face of human fear and jealousy. It's about God's goodness that is stronger than all else. It's about Divine commitment to bring new life into the world and the Way of Jesus that makes it possible for us yet.

Hear this story this week, witness love that cannot be conquered or corrupted. Join your voice and hear the people sing once more of a new way, off a preferred future, of God's way of peace as sure as tomorrow comes!

May it be so.