

Isaiah 50: 4-11
Philippians 2: 5-11
Luke 19: 28-40; 45-48

Spellbound

Over 20 years ago, I attended the Bread and Puppet Circus in Glover, Vermont. The several performances included a Passion Play: a depiction of the story of Holy Week. But instead of reading Scripture, or having actors act in the costumes of First Century Palestine, the performance used large puppets, and singing, and processions. The role of Jesus was played by a leafy tree: a sapling. And the audience had to follow the action to various sites over several acres to follow the story. By using almost no spoken words, and compelling but unusual images, Bread and Puppet managed to bring the story alive in a new way for me. I was spellbound, transfixed, as I absorbed the narrative of the last days of Jesus on an intuitive level.

We are used to certain images and phrases as constants in our seasonal worship life. Candles for Christmas Eve; lilies on Easter; and palms for today, Palm Sunday. But even though each of the 4 Gospels describes Jesus' entry into Jerusalem at the time of his last Passover, each account is different. And today, we notice how Luke's story is unique. Two of the expected parts of the drama are missing: there are no palm branches and there are no "Hosannas." This piece of political theater is using other metaphors, pulling together ancient promises and contemporary threat.

It seems that Jesus was a student of the Hebrew prophets, and consciously delved into their words for his public actions. The books of Isaiah and Zechariah and the Psalms were especially meaningful to him. Zechariah speaks of the coming of the Prince of Peace to Jerusalem, "humble and riding on a donkey colt." The Mount of Olives, outside the city walls, was named as the symbolic starting point for the procession of the Prince of Peace. The crowd of Jesus' disciples and followers seem to have understood all this symbolism: we hear their shouted response, also echoing the prophet Zechariah and the Psalms: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" And when Jesus is asked by some of the Pharisees to control this crowd, he responds with an image from the prophet Habakkuk: "The very stones will cry out from the wall." Jesus is making a statement about his words of peace confronting human tyranny.

The road from the Mount of Olives would have taken this procession down in the valley, and then up again on the other side to reach the gates of the city. It is on this uphill path that the symbolism becomes more deeply emotional, and Jesus weeps over the occupied city. He weeps over its delusions, its reliance on false security, its ignorance of the "things that truly make for peace." And he weeps over the future of the people and their children. As he comes to the religious center, the Temple, his mood shifts to anger, the theatrical action shifts to a kind of violence. Jesus drives the entrepreneurs in the outer courts away, accusing them of theft.

The Bible scholar Dominic Crossan speculates that on this very day in ancient Jerusalem, there was another procession, entering by another gate. Pontius Pilate was riding on his war horse, surrounded by soldiers armed to the teeth and all the trumpeting and magnificence that flaunted Roman military power. So Jesus' actions were a conscious parody of this display: the lowly peaceful donkey, the humble supporters, the praises of the God of Israel were all designed to challenge Rome in a very public way.

All of this behavior, on that first “Palm Sunday” with no palms, has a double effect. It makes some people want to kill him. We can see the logic of this. Jerusalem was a tinderbox of anti-Roman feeling; the military presence of the Empire was always increased around the times of festivals – particularly a festival of liberation like Passover. If Jesus’ strange theater provoked any violent repression from Pilate, many people would suffer, many would die. Some thought that it would be better to do away with this one charismatic figure than risk that. On the other hand, Luke says that all the people were spellbound: they were hanging on his every word. The ministry of Jesus was at a critical point, expectation had reached a fever pitch, people were moved and exultant and angry and anxious. Much as we would like to keep this story a matter of “the lips of children making sweet hosannas ring” there is a darker and more difficult story underneath the rejoicing on the Mount of Olives.

I notice the way the rejoicing of the crowd echoes, with different wording, the words of the angels at Jesus birth. Back in the 2nd chapter of Luke, we read, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.” But on this Palm Sunday with no palms, we hear, “Peace in heaven and glory in highest heaven.” “Peace on earth” is more distant and seemingly unattainable in that setting.

And so, on the road up to the gates, Jesus weeps. “If only,” he cries. If only you, even you, had recognized on this day the things that make for peace. Even today, when there are so few days left, it may have made a difference. But you do not recognize this time of visitation from God. Even when Jesus speaks in the plainest language, even when he speaks in metaphor and parable, even when he does deeds of power, even when he demonstrates through symbolic action, we do not recognize who comes to visit us. We do not recognize what he comes to bring.

When Jesus laments over Jerusalem, he knows that it is incapable – and by extension all cities of the empire are incapable – of living into an era of peace. The divisions and anxiety are too great. And he laments over us, when we do not recognize his presence, when we are spellbound by powerful words and deeds, but unable to change.

And we respond with laments of our own. “If only,” we cry. If only Jesus has toned down that political theater and made his message less confrontational. If only he had walked more quietly into Jerusalem, with a few disciples, giving them gentle and reassuring talks about God’s coming intervention in the world. If only he had chosen a time when the Roman and the ruling classes were a little less edgy and defensive. If only he had let those people selling things in the Temple alone: he wasn’t going to change that anyway. If only he wouldn’t makes us uncomfortable with those tears and that talk of enemies and crushing and stones.

Our story today tells us that there are words that must be spoken. When Jesus calls for that colt, allows the cloaks to be spread as a saddle, allows other cloaks to be spread as a carpet, and winds down and up that road into danger, he starts a conversation that will never be silenced. Can he ask those disciples to shut up? Even in the face of division, edginess, challenge and danger, he answers, “No. It is impossible to be silent.” If these people were silent, other voices would rise up. The reality of oppression, and cooperation with oppression, is too loud and too visible to ignore.

Later in the passion narrative, we will hear Jesus say, “My kingdom is not of this earth.” It is not a kingdom with its origins in the armies of Rome or any other empire. It is not a kingdom enmeshed in the same political maneuvering, the same compromises with injustice that mark the rulers of ancient Jerusalem. It is not a kingdom which will sacrifice lives to stability, or offer pageantry in place of substance. The kingdom Jesus brings allows the peace of God’s heaven to come to earth, through deeds of a different kind of power, through different ways of living. The kingdom Jesus brings will not be silenced for the sake of a comfortable or orderly status quo.

The challenge for us, as we watch this strange procession with the Prince of Peace in mourning, is to navigate the paradox that is the kingdom of God. We hear the songs of the disciples as we enter Holy Week, and we remember the angels’ songs at Christmas. How will we sing songs of peace? How will we demonstrate, through symbol and word, our recognition that the world needs to break free from violent patterns and habits? How will we overcome our polite reticence and speak forceful words of love? What is it in us that resists the tears of the humble king and why do we prefer to be entertained? When will we be transformed from spellbound audience to “doers of the word, and not hearers only.”

The church is a place where we can weep over children’s lives lost or cities destroyed by war. And it is the place where we are given the power and the responsibility to move beyond tears. We follow in the costly journey of the Prince of Peace. With or without palms in our hands, we join the procession, full of hope and anticipation for the kingdom of God. We remember the words of the prophet Micah, speaking of the blessed one, who comes in the name of the Lord:

“He shall judge between the nations and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”

May God speed that day; may we work for its coming. Amen