

Zechariah 9: 9-12
Philippians 2: 5-11
Luke 19: 28-48

The Things that Make for Peace
March 20, 2016 – Palm/ Passion Sunday
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All of the Gospels tell a version of this story: shortly before his death on the cross, Jesus arranged to arrive in Jerusalem riding on a donkey colt. It was pre-planned, and crowds of both disciples and critics were there. In Luke's Gospel, you may have noticed, there were no Palms and no Hosannas. So maybe, this year, we should have called it "Cloak Sunday" and processed around the sanctuary waving our coats and shawls in the air. In fact, we could still do that later on, if you are so inclined. ☺

This little example of the way we conflate and make assumptions about Scripture based on our traditions might cause us to reflect, at the beginning of this week in particular, on the horrific consequences set in motion by a misreading of the events of Holy Week. I am referring to the way that Jewish people have been blamed for the death of Jesus. When we really read Luke's Gospel today we find that palms and hosannas are not there. In the same way, it would be a misreading of the Christian Scriptures, a distortion of the story of Jesus' life and death to blame the victims instead of the powers-that-be. There are those forces and structures that, in every age, scapegoat some so that others may feel "safe." And so, I bring to mind again that the Pharisees are not Jesus' enemies, they are his conversation partners. They often call him "teacher" or rabbi. They challenge him and warn him, just as many of us would do in their place.

That first "Palm Sunday" was not a group of congregants worshipping together, feeling the welcome of an established community. It was more like a political demonstration, or an acted out parable, or provocative street theater. And Jesus was both director and star. He had something to say to the crowds, to Jerusalem, and to the Roman Empire that ruled them all with an iron fist. And the crowd seems ready to listen. Maybe this entrance of Jesus evoked the kind of joy and relief that we can only imagine, for example, when United Nations troops arrive in a country torn apart by genocide, or when a convoy of trucks carries grain to a starving people. Finally, someone has heard their cries for help. Finally, someone will rescue them and give them hope.

On the other hand, some of the Pharisees (who may have been feeling the same kind of joy and hope) are more cautious. They are more aware of what can happen if Rome feels threatened even by a ragtag group of religious fanatics. Rome tramples people, brutally, and puts them in their place. So the Pharisees fret: "Teacher," they say, "tell your followers to quiet down. They're going to bring down the heel of Rome on all our throats. Don't be causing trouble now, at festival time. Governor Pilate is here."

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, no matter what the cost to himself.

The road from the Mount of Olives would have taken this procession of cloak-wavers 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.

In all these actions, Jesus challenges the “Pax Romana,” the Roman Peace: a time of stability in the Empire. Pax Romana was the kind of peace that Pilate and Rome worked hard to impose: a business-as-usual kind of peace that benefited the empire and the people on top. It existed only because Rome squashed all dissent. Wise and cautious people in Jerusalem knew this, and behaved accordingly. Wise but determined people like Jesus knew this, and decided to name it for what it was. The methods of the Empire were not the things that made for peace. It was not the peace of highest heaven, but a cruel mockery of true peace.

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. The boot of the conqueror is too heavy. The lies are too powerful. And he laments over us, when we do not recognize his presence, when we are impressed by powerful words and deeds, but unable to change. Perhaps he even laments the fickle, cheering crowd, who will melt away when the soldiers arrive. No more “Blessed is the king” then. So many are not brave enough to recognize the things that make for peace. The stories of Palm Sunday make so clear that we can say one thing one minute and then its opposite the next. This is in our nature, I’m afraid, without some kind of steadying faith to help us through.

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 as a time of visitation from God. Even when Jesus speaks in the plainest language, or even when he speaks in metaphor and parable, or 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. And we turn away from the hard, confusing and frightening work of following him.

Paul’s beautiful song in the second chapter of his letter to the Philippians describes, in cosmic language, what Jesus does to demonstrate his willingness to suffer for change. Rather than grasping at divine power, he emptied himself out for the sake of the world. This turning away from the love of power, paradoxically, has tremendous spiritual power. As Mahatma Gandhi said, 19 centuries after the first Palm Sunday, “The day the power of love overrules the love of power, the world will know peace.”

Jesus weeps over the city. Today, Jesus weeps over our cities, our lives, our blindness. Today we are challenged to see and hear Jesus' tears, as well as to hear the cries of those who call to us from all the places of continuing oppression, all the cries that yearn for true peace. Last week, I heard John Dorhauer, president of the United Church of Christ say this at a Q&A session, in response to a question about how "my little church can go out into the world" - "It is role of those who are called out into mission to "hear the cries....Mission starts in any community with the hearing of the cries."

The challenge for us, as we watch this strange procession with the Prince of Peace in mourning, is to navigate the confusing place that is the kingdom of God in our world. We hear the songs of the disciples as we enter Holy Week, and we remember the angels' songs about "Peace on Earth" at Christmas and we hear cries for peace from those fleeing war. 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? It's easy to think of other ways the world cries out to us for a revolutionary kind of healing and peace: the cries of those suffering from ethnic stereotypes, media propaganda, gender roles, consumerism, and our degradation of planet earth. 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 easily swayed onlookers 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. We weep over photos of child refugees, bombed temples and bull-dozered homes. And it is the place where we are given the power and the responsibility to move beyond tears. Today we heard a story that began with hopeful songs, moved into tears of sadness and frustration, then moved again into action. 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. Amen.