

Peace & Empire
6th Sunday in Lent – Palm Sunday
April 14, 2019
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[Psalm 118 \(selected verses\)](#)
[Isaiah 50:5-9a](#)
[Luke 19:28-42](#)

Here we are, at last – Palm Sunday! We’ve been with Jesus through all of Lent, wending our way to Jerusalem, and at long last, we have arrived! But... amidst the praising of Jesus, the extravagant palm fronds waving in the air and the atmosphere of celebration – there’s still a malaise, a cloud of unease that hovers over the whole proceedings. If you listened closely to the story from the Bible today, you may have been surprised at how different Luke’s version of these events is than the other Gospel accounts. First of all, there are no palm branches in Luke! Only John’s Gospel talks about palm branches directly, though Mark says “leafy branches.” Instead, in Luke (and in Matthew), people shuck off their cloaks and place them before Jesus... as he rides OUT of Bethany!

While we’ve been all prepared for entering the city to acclaim, and Jesus riding on the donkey, Luke doesn’t even let us glimpse Jerusalem until after all the pomp and circumstance have been lifted up. In Luke’s version, Jesus rides on a colt that had been tied up in town. The disciples simply show up, say “the Master needs this” and take the animal away from its owners. Somewhat miraculously, that’s enough! Perhaps the owners of the donkey are excited that Jesus chose it to ride into town? Perhaps they knew the prophesy from Zechariah 9, that the Messiah would ride on a young donkey? Possibly, but it’s more likely that they don’t want to displease a powerful person. After all, it was mostly the Romans who were referred to as “Master” in this time – and no one on in their right mind wants to make the Romans mad! Look – governor Pilate himself was in town, along with an entire legion of soldiers, close to a thousand men in heavy armor! It takes a big to-do for Pilate to leave the Governor’s palace at Cesarea Maritima, on the coast just north of

modern Tel Aviv.

What was the big thing happening? It was the Passover celebration, of course. Every year, the Jewish people remember the exodus from Egypt – and the plagues that finally convinced Pharaoh to let them go. Remember, the last of those plagues was the plague of the firstborn, where every firstborn son in Egypt would be killed, except if the home had the blood of a lamb painted on the lintel. These homes were “passed over” – and only these homes were passed over. As a result, Pharaoh finally acknowledged the power of the Holy One, and let the Hebrew people go. Egypt’s empire was powerful, and the Hebrews were slaves, without any training in war. Yet, God led them out of Egypt, out of oppression, and into the crucible of the wilderness that created a whole people from disparate families.

Now, in Jesus’ day, the role of evil empire was being played by Rome. At a celebration of deliverance from oppression and death, is it any surprise that the Roman governor would take an interest? Is it any surprise that the Messiah would make an appearance in Jerusalem at this time? No wonder the disciples were excited! Even Judas had to have been thinking, “This is IT! Jesus will overthrow the Roman Empire!” People threw off their cloaks – their protection from the elements – and spread them before Jesus. Symbolically, this says, “You are protection enough. Your God is our God, and God will save us.”¹

And what do the people shout? We think of Palm Sunday as a time of Hosannas ringing out – but not in Luke! In Luke, the cry is “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in Heaven! Glory in the Highest!” Luke is echoing not just Psalm 118 – Blessed is the One who comes in the Name of the Lord – but also the words of the Angels appearing to the shepherds at Jesus’ birth, “Peace on Earth! Goodwill to humankind! Glory in the Highest Heaven!” Unlike Mark and Matthew, Luke is intentionally emphasizing Jesus’ peaceful entry – his peaceful messiahship. And, at the same time, he is emphasizing just how different Jesus is from the expectation of the crowd: they call out “Blessed is the King who

¹ An echo of Jesus’ name – Yehoshua, God Saves

comes in the name of the Lord” rather than “the One.” And when this King arrives at the city of Jerusalem, what happens? Jesus – celebrated, beloved Jesus – weeps in anguish at the city’s imminent destruction. Suffice it to say that this is NOT what you expect to happen when the man you’ve been calling King shows up at the moment of confrontation.

When I think of this moment, I imagine Jesus remembering the words of the Prophet Isaiah – the account of the Suffering Servant in Exile. “The Lord God opened my ear; I didn’t rebel; I didn’t turn my back. Instead, I gave my body to attackers, and my cheeks to beard pluckers. I didn’t hide my face from insults and spitting. The Lord God will help me; therefore I haven’t been insulted.” Isaiah intended these words as comfort to believers in exile, those who were persecuted – and Jesus knows that this celebration only announces persecution to come. Yet, he comes to bring a peaceful change, a revolution away from the empire-minded world and to the equality of God’s kingdom of Heaven on earth. Richard Vinson puts it this way:

His message, in other words, was not, “Make me king or be destroyed by Rome.” It was “Be transformed by God’s rule into a kingdom with no rich and no poor, no powerful and no weak.” Rejecting those terms of peace meant choosing the empire instead, where inevitably the weak are crushed.

Jesus’ peace – God’s peace – is a peace of understanding, of equality, of mutual respect and admiration as fellow children of God. In contrast, even the Roman senator Tacitus knew that the recently-formed Roman Empire was heading in the wrong direction. Tacitus was the first in his family to move up in the Roman class system – it’s believed that his father was a freedman, or freed slave. Knowing his history, it’s clear that he knew the effects of poverty and shame. One of his surviving writings is this:

[The Romans] rob, they slaughter, they plunder – and they call it

*'empire'. Where they make a wasteland, they call it 'peace'*²

It's clear that the so-called peace of empire is destructive, while the true peace of God is constructive – and the difference between the two is huge. When Jesus first sees the city from the Mount of Olives, he weeps and exclaims, “How I wish you knew today what would bring peace! But you can't see.” In Jesus' day, you understand, the people believed that the name of Jerusalem – Yeru shalaim – meant “Foundation of Peace and Prosperity.” You can hear in the word Yerushalaim the similarity to Shalom – peace, wholeness in Hebrew – and the modern Arabic shalem, meaning peace and prosperity. Luke is pointing out that the so-called “foundation of peace” is unable to see what true peace looks like. Peace is not rising up in arms against one emperor after another. Peace is not utterly destroying your enemies. Peace is seen in God's kingdom, where those that society has oppressed are lifted up, and those that society has lauded are brought down. Even Paul points this out in the “Christ-hymn” of Phillipians 2:

For though he was equal with God, he took the form of a slave, and submitted to death, yes, even death on a cross. You see, Jesus, riding on a donkey, is proclaiming humble peace – here is the Son of God, not shined up, slicked back, but merely riding on a humble animal. The suffering servant of God, though he was equal with God, going into Jerusalem toward his own death. He embodies the spirit of Psalm 118 – the cornerstone that was rejected, now entering the gates of justice, and proclaiming the glory of God – the Glory of God's Kingdom of Heaven, which we pray, will be on earth as in heaven.

We struggle with this, even today. As much as we hold up democracy emphasizing equality, with people of all genders serving together in leadership, with ideals of anyone being able to be leaders of our nation and of the world – the same forces of empire oppose the Kingdom. “Powers and Principalities,” as the Apostle Paul puts it. These powers of tyranny try to corrupt through bribery, coercing the world back into empire. Into destruction, and calling it peace. Into

² Tacitus, qtd by Michael Joseph Brown in his “Commentary on Luke 19:28-40” posted on WorkingPreacher.org (2016)

conformity, and calling it unity. Into fear and anger of those who are different, calling society to oppress them all the more. Into this, Jesus weeps, saying, “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But they are hid from your eyes.”

When Christians support the forces of empire, even when we laud Jesus, we fail to realize the Kingdom of Heaven. My friends – the Kingdom is already here – Glory in the Highest! But the kingdom is not yet fully realized. You are called to help build it. To be the disciples, leading the way. Dropping your cloaks of protection. Placing your trust in God, rather than princes and demagogues. Lifting up the outcast rather than making things worse for them. This is what we are called to do this holy week. This is what we are called to do as citizens in the Kingdom of Heaven.

May you trust in God. May Jesus lead you into peace. May the Holy Spirit fill you and inspire you to help build the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of Peace, here on earth.