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First Presbyterian Church  
April 14, 2019  
Luke 19: 28-40

### **“For God So Loved the World”**

“Palm Sunday,” Fleming Rutledge says, “has always been a crowd pleaser: the festivity of the procession, the stirring music, the repeated ‘Hosannas.’” It’s a great day to come to church. I know a lot of people think if you’re going to only come to church once or twice a year it should be on Christmas Eve or Easter, but in my opinion, Palm Sunday is the one to attend.

But Palm Sunday also suffers from a bit of schizophrenia. Should the focus of the day be on Jesus’ triumphal entry and shouts of Hosanna? Or should we focus on the cross and shouts of “crucify him”? Triumph or tragedy? What will it be?

Mostly we go for triumph. After all, who doesn’t love a parade? And the bigger the better! Three Rivers Festival, here we come!

But the Three Rivers Festival parade doesn’t hold a candle to the Palm Sunday parade in which Jesus participated. There were crowds in the street – no sitting by as idle spectators in your lawn chairs here! There were shouts of Hosanna! People threw their cloaks down in front of Jesus, who strode in on a donkey. It was both impressive and oxymoronic all at the same time.

The city of Jerusalem normally had a population of around 50,000 people. Depending on which scholar you ask, there were between 200,000 and 2 million people in Jerusalem that week celebrating Passover. Obviously there’s a big discrepancy in those numbers, but the point is no matter how you slice it, there were a lot of people. So many people, in fact, that the city was in turmoil – which is why Pilate was there in all his gaudy glory with his horses and chariots and gleaming armor. He moved into the city with the Roman army at the beginning of Passover to make sure nothing got out of hand. For you see, insurrection was in the air. And with all those people, the city had a powder keg atmosphere. It could explode at any moment.

I liken Jerusalem's atmosphere to the atmosphere St. Louis experienced days before the verdict was due in the trial of the police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown. (If you're not familiar with Michael Brown, you've probably heard of Ferguson, the St. Louis suburb where Michael Brown was killed and was ground zero for the protests and Black Lives Matter movement.) Everyone knew the verdict was due any day, and in anticipation of it more and more people were heading to Ferguson, which is a bedroom community of about 30,000 people. Peaceful protestors (like many clergy I know) and not-so-peaceful protestors were starting to arrive along with news crews and extra police officers and eventually tanks and I think the MO National Guard. The city was definitely on edge. Even in my little neck of the woods, which was just 30 minutes from Ferguson but also a lifetime away, one could feel the tension.

Jerusalem felt like that when Jesus came riding into it on that donkey. But before he does that, he stops at the Mount of Olives, where he would have gotten a good view of the city down below. He could see the throngs of people; could see that the army was there; and could probably feel the tense atmosphere.

What he does next is intentional on his part. He tells his disciples in detailed instructions that take up the bulk of the story to get a colt so that he can ride it into the city, a city that is ready to boil over at any moment.

The disciples bring the colt back-our Lord needs it, they say-and Jesus gets on it and the people spread their cloaks and palm branches on the ground and sing out, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

The protestors sing a peace song. But this is no ordinary peace song; we've heard this one before. Where have we heard it, you ask? Why back when Jesus was born, of course! "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace." The angels sang it on the night Jesus was born!

But 30 some odd years later, the song carries a note of dissonance, because now the baby is an adult, making adult demands, and we know what peace really means. It's not all angels and shepherds smiling under a starry sky; the peace Jesus proclaims is desperately needed, but it's hard to live by, too.

And if you're Pilate, leader of the current kingdom who keeps the peace by marching in on a warhorse with a very imposing army, you can't have someone like Jesus riding in a donkey making everyone think that peace is based on justice, mercy and the love of God. You just can't. I think you'd get a little perturbed. In fact, you might get so perturbed that you start thinking of ways to get rid of him. Because not only is he disturbing the peace with this peace he proclaims, he's got people thinking he's the savior, the long-awaited Messiah who will free them from their captives. A guy like Pilate can't have that going on.

And so we have this clash of two kingdoms. Rome or Christ? Domination and ruthless power, or justice, mercy, and the love of God? Which one do you choose?

Because we have the gift of hindsight we know which one we should choose. But, do we always choose the right one? It's OK to be honest and admit that we have our contradictions. Someone tells us the best way to create peace is by initiating war, and we believe him. We're told that the strong are strengthened by holding off the weak. Parents confront fear by buying a handgun for the dresser drawer. Schools encourage competition over cooperation. Governments and businesses seek to win at all costs, even if it bankrupts them. And Jesus rides his lowly farm animal through it all, championing peace in a way no one ever expected and, quite frankly, we're still having a hard time understanding.

Last week I read an article in the paper about the 3 black churches in Louisiana that were set fire to and burned to the ground. Ronald Milburn, a member of Greater Union Baptist Church, said he smelled the smoke from four miles away as he drove to the church.

Members of the congregation had started to gather outside. Some cried. As Rev. Harry Richard watched his small church burn, one member suggested they do the only thing they could: pray.

So they formed a semi-circle on the side of the road and locked arms. "As I began to pray, I heard God say, 'pray for that individual or whomever did this,'" Richard said.

And so that's what they did while the smoke billowed and flames glowed in the church, beyond its archway.

Who would have the courage to pray for their arson? Only a bunch of people who follow a savior who rides a donkey, that's who. To this day, such acts as that cause us to scratch our heads. Pray for the one who set fire to your church? Is that the way of justice? I'm afraid Jesus would say well, it's certainly the way of peace. But since such peace is so contrary to what we're taught, we're still yelling crucify when we should be shouting Hosanna, save us.

As the events of this coming week will remind us, Jesus saves us in ways no one ever imagined: through his suffering, not his splendor; through his vulnerability, not his power over; through his willingness and determination to never waver being who God had called him to be—God with us, God for us—even though that insistence would lead him straight to his death on a cross.

Listen to how Barbara Brown Taylor spoke of Jesus' saving work in what she calls Jesus' obituary:

It is an old, old story: Love comes into the world as a little child, fresh from God. When Love grows up, Love feeds people, Love heals people, Love turns things upside down. Love's actions do not set well with the people in charge. They warn Love to leave well enough alone. Love meets hate, meets politics, meets fear. Love goes on loving, which gets Love killed—not by villains in black hats but by people like us: clergy, patriots, God-fearing folk. What brought them together was their rage at him [at Love] for being less than they wanted him to be—or for being more than they wanted him to be—but in any case for not being who they wanted him to be, and they killed him for it. (Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain*, p. 126)

The road to Jerusalem isn't easy. It's filled with paradoxes. Donkeys and warhorses. Shouts of Hosanna on Sunday; cries of crucify on Friday. Becoming vulnerable to create lasting peace, rather than powerful to create a temporary one. It's a challenge to understand it all. But perhaps the bigger challenge is allowing it to transform us so that we can transform this world into the kingdom

Jesus tried to usher in so that when we say “The Peace of Christ be with you”, it will truly come to pass.

Amen.