

Sermon, Palm Sunday Year A
March 16, 2008
St. John's Episcopal Church
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Joining Jesus' Procession

When Jesus and his disciples had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord has need of them.' Matthew 21:1-2

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. Matthew 27:1

You know, it wasn't because Jesus was tired that he told his disciples to go find a donkey for him to ride the final stretch of his one hundred mile walk from Galilee to Jerusalem. And the procession with the crowds and the palms—that wasn't a spontaneous, unexpected event. You see, Jesus came to Jerusalem for a reason. And he came with a plan. He would process into the city from the east on a donkey with his band of peasant followers cheering him on at the precise time Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, was processing in from the west at the head of the large imperial army. Apparently, the governors who enforced the Roman occupation of Judea of that time liked to show up in Jerusalem prior to any major Jewish festival. Jews traveled from all Judea to be there for the festivals, and the governors wanted to be there, too, with their armies, just in case any hot head got the brilliant idea that it would be a good time to stage a revolt. It was particularly important for the governors to show up at Passover, because Passover was a celebration of Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt centuries before. Those who bristled under the rod of Roman rule were likely to hear in those ancient stories the same call to freedom that their ancestors did, and if that should happen, the Roman army would be there, to remind the Jews who was in charge.¹ Remember that crucifixion was common in those days. It was the Roman's particularly brutal and public execution of anyone who dared to defy their authority.

Jesus' procession, therefore, was really a "counter-procession," and a charged symbolic act. "Pilate's procession was about the coming of the imperial army," write biblical scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. "Jesus' procession was about the coming of the Kingdom of God." Pilate's procession embodied the power and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus' procession embodied an alternative vision of authority—God as humble, peaceful, and close the very people rejected by their society as unworthy and unclean. "The two processions," say Borg and Crossan, "embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus' crucifixion."²

¹ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006). This sermon is inspired by Borg and Crossan's book and is, in truth, my understanding and articulation of their central thesis.

² Borg and Crossan, 2.

Now the first thing Jesus that did when he arrived in the city was go to the temple, the holiest place in the world for Jewish people, and during a festival week, a hub of constant activity. And what did he do there? He overturned the tables of the moneychangers and drove out all who were selling and buying animals for the ritual sacrifices. “My house shall be called a house of prayer” he said, quoting the prophet Jeremiah, “but you are making it a den of robbers.” It wasn’t that he objected to the ritual sacrifices of his own faith, but how they had become corrupted by powerful leaders as a means to take advantage of vulnerable people.

The conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities only intensified as the week went on. If you want to understand why Jesus was crucified, all you have to do is read the Gospel of Matthew beginning with chapter 21, which tells the story of the procession into Jerusalem, through to the end of chapter 27. It’s remarkable that he lasted a week. The only reason he did, I suppose, is that he reserved his harshest criticism for the religious authorities, who did not have the power to put him to death on their own. They were as much under Roman rule as anyone else, and they needed to collude with Rome to bring about Jesus’ death. That, as you heard, took some time.

Meanwhile Jesus gathered large crowds around him every day as he healed and taught of God’s forgiveness and mercy. He openly and unsparingly condemned the religious authorities for their hypocrisy and indifference to the poor. For over a chapter he says things like, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees! You blind fools! You lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. You tithe mint, dill, and cumin but have neglected the weightier matters of justice, and mercy and faith. You clean the outside of your cup and plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.”

Jesus also predicted that the temple would be destroyed and that darkness would, for a time, cover the land. We warned his own disciples not to take up arms then, but to flee to the hills. Keep alert, he told them. Keep awake. And he told story after story about the kingdom of heaven that left no doubt about what he thought God’s priorities were. Stories like this: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, all the nations will gather before him, and he will separate the people from one another as a shepherd separates the goats from the sheep. To those on his right hand, he will say, ‘Come you that are blessed by God; inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was sick and cared for me; I was in prison, and you visited me; I was naked, and you gave me clothing.’ Then the righteous will answer, ‘Lord when was it when we saw you hungry and we gave you food and thirsty and we gave you something to drink?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Just as you did it to the least of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed depart from me. For I was hungry and you gave me no food; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink; I was a stranger and you did not welcome me; in prison and you did not visit me.’ And they will also answer, ‘Lord when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or in prison and did not take care of you?’ And he will say, ‘Just as you did not do it for the least of these, you did not do it for me.’”

Jesus was no victim. He came into Jerusalem with a passion—a passion for the Kingdom of God, a kingdom that excludes no one, unlike the temple practices of his day that established rigid codes of righteousness purity. He came speaking of a God who freely offered forgiveness and mercy to all, unlike the temple practices that mediated

forgiveness only for those who had the means to pay. He came with a clarity of purpose, that it was his destiny to speak and to heal and to teach and to protest in the name of this compassionate God.

He drew large crowds with him wherever he went. The Romans weren't all that interested in what he was saying, and they were clearly annoyed at the religious leaders for not dealing with Jesus themselves. But the crowds were a cause for concern. Pilate probably wasn't as tortured a soul as Matthew betrays him. He was as ruthless as he needed to be to keep order in Jerusalem. From the Roman's perspective, Jesus simply had to be silenced and given up as an example so that his followers would disperse. So they complied with the religious leaders' wishes to have Jesus crucified.

But Jesus was no victim; nor was he naïve. He knew what the likely consequences of his actions would be. Remember how he tried to prepare his disciples as they journeyed to Jerusalem, to warn them that he was going to die, something, as you recall, they couldn't believe or accept. I don't think he wanted to die. Remember how he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, that the cup of sorrow might pass him by? But he knew what he was up against, and he believed that it was his destiny to die.

What did his death mean then? What does it mean now? We often say in the words of worship that Jesus died for us and for our sins, and I believe that. I believe that somehow Jesus' death reconciles us to God in ways that we cannot on our own. But I don't believe God needed him to die. What kind of God would that be? Some say that Jesus died *because* of our sins,³ and I believe that, too. I believe that it wasn't God's will for him to be crucified, but it was inevitable, given who he was, what he stood for, and how he lived. Surely God was grieved at Jesus' death and is grieved still.

The week before us is a gift—a challenging one, but a gift nonetheless. I have nothing against Easter chocolates, Easter outfits, and Easter vacations. I plan to partake of them all. But not this week. This is a week for us to walk with Jesus, to join *his* procession, to look through his eyes at the world around us, to look through his eyes for God. I charge you to take a bit of time each day and read through one of the gospel accounts of Jesus' last week. Matthew's gospel we are mostly reading in church this year—you might start with him. You will hear Jesus as you've never heard him before. Then come, if you can, to one or more of the services before Easter Sunday. They are, in fact, one dramatic service spread over three days.

In the past, I've thought of Holy Week as the week to remember that when everything goes wrong, God is still with us and able to bring new life out of the worst we can do or experience. I still think of it that way and invite all of us when we are in that place of hardship to come and experience God here. I've thought of it as the week to ponder our own suffering and failings, our disappointments and grief. I still think of it that way, too, and I invite all of us living in that harsh place to come and experience God here. But what I also see this year, and invite you to see as well, is Jesus in all his strength, speaking truth to power, proclaiming his allegiance to a God of compassion and justice. I invite you to come with all your passion and strength, to hear, once again, the invitation to walk with him on his path—a path of compassion, mercy, and justice; a path of forgiveness, reconciliation, and generosity; a path that becomes as we walk it the kingdom of God in our midst.

³ Borg and Crossan, 162.