

“Power Play”
Palm Sunday, April 10, 2022
Scripture: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Luke 19:28-40

There are some stories in the Bible that are so familiar and have been heard so many times, that their significance can get buried by domestication; we tame these stories by telling them over and over until we really can't hear them anymore. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, Palm Sunday, is one of those stories. For centuries the Church has incorporated this story into its liturgy by re-enacting it by waving palm fronds, as we did during our first hymn, or having a priest or bishop enter on an actual donkey. I'll never do that. The point is the story and its details become the focus of our attention. We commemorate the event instead of digging deeper to find what this story is trying to say about Jesus and the world he lived in and what it says about us and our world.

Over the years I've described on Palm Sunday the contrasting parades that were held. On the one hand we have the one described in the gospels, and all of them describe it in some fashion. On the other hand there would have been an annual parade held by Pilate and his entourage. Pilate, as the representative of Rome, would be accompanied by regiments of troops who were there to keep order. This is the week of Passover, when the people celebrated their liberation from the tyranny of Egypt. But Rome's presence would be there to remind them they were still enslaved.

Jesus' parade acts as a sort of parody of Pilate's. It's his way of telling the powers that be they are not in as much control as they think. But it's not meant as a threat. Jesus isn't leading a revolution. He's revealing an alternative. He's offering a display of power rooted in nonviolence. Everything Pilate does is meant to intimidate and coerce. As pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover they would have passed several victims of crucifixion, people executed as a warning to everyone gathering to watch their behavior and to be sure not to take the meaning of Passover too seriously. For Rome power was meant to be used to control other people, to dominate and enforce.

But for Jesus power has a whole different purpose. The power of nonviolence is meant to transform and not coerce, to join in struggle and not dominate. What Jesus offers is a path to real change in his world, and to real change in ours.

The system of domination, where a wealthy few held control over the impoverished many, was nothing new in the world. It existed long before Jesus' day and has continued to the present. We can say that systems like the Roman Empire are mostly the norm for human civilization. That kind of disparity and coercion has always been a part of human society. And as Marcus Borg and John Crossan point out in their book *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem*, the people who hold the power in that system aren't necessarily bad people. They're as much caught up in a system beyond their control as those who

are victimized by it. Changing that system, trying to create a more just society, requires appealing to the goodness that lies in the hearts of those who benefit from the system as well as those who are hurt by it.

When Jesus enters Jerusalem he's inviting all its people, poor and wealthy, vulnerable and powerful, to be captured by a new vision of their world, a vision that will tear away the foundation of Roman domination. And it is the most dangerous thing he's ever done.

Why do you suppose the Pharisees and other religious leaders are so desperate for him to shut his followers up? They know where this could lead. They know the powers in charge will never allow this kind of threat to their dominance to stand. I think we have tended to see the Pharisees in this story as the bad guys because they're always portrayed as Jesus' opponents. But in reality their main concern is to protect the population, and themselves, from harm. These are not bad people, blind maybe, frightened certainly, but not evil.

What's truly evil is the corrupt system that has hold of them and puts them in the position where all they can do is oppose Jesus' movement and try to shut it down. What's evil is a corrupt system that is so blatantly unjust the only way it can be maintained is through intimidation and violence.

During Lent this year the Library class has been reading the book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by Black theologian James Cone. In one chapter about women in the Civil Rights movement, Cone says, "Through their actions, women expressed their conviction that their nonviolent suffering could save not only the Black community from white supremacy but even save America from its worst self." The movement for civil rights in this country has never been merely about changing laws. It's always been about redeeming society, freeing us from the evil of a corrupt system that drives people to do terrible things out of fear and hatred.

The roots of that struggle are found in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. They're found in his insistence on the power of love and compassion to persuade and transform. In his final published essay before his death, the great civil rights activist John Lewis wrote, "Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble. Voting and participating in the democratic process are key. The vote is the most powerful nonviolent change agent you have in a democratic society. You must use it because it is not guaranteed. You can lose it." There was no such thing as a vote in Jesus' world, but he and his disciples made good trouble when they made their way into Jerusalem. And they unleash a power that is irrepressible. Even if he had told his followers to stop chanting, the stones themselves would start to shout.

Palm Sunday is more than a commemoration. Palm Sunday, Jesus' power play in Jerusalem, his good trouble is our blueprint. He shows us what we need to do to resist our own corrupt system and escape its influence on our lives. Jesus goes into Jerusalem and to the cross not in our place, but to show us the way. If we want to shake off our complicity in the evil

around us, if we want to see the transformation of ourselves and our world, then the path of compassion and love is the only way to get there. Jesus shows us the way and he walks it with us even now. It's time to lift our voices with the disciples and unleash the power to set us free.

Amen