

A Protest March

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Mark 11: 1-11

In his book, *The Freedom Party Revolution and the Churches*, Robert Spike recalls an incident from the early days of the civil rights movement. Flying out of Jackson, Mississippi, he overheard a conversation coming from across the aisle. A Catholic sister was lamenting all the unrest in Mississippi, complaining loudly about all the “outside agitators” – the students and preachers who had come to her state in support of civil rights. She was certain that their presence was provoking violence on the part of white racists. “I do not question their motives,” she said, “nor even the rightness of their position. But surely it is a bad thing to create turmoil by stirring up people who feel differently.” Robert Spike adds that the entire time that she was talking, she was nervously fingering a cross hanging around her neck.

Creating turmoil by stirring up people, especially those who may not agree with you...I wonder if people in the religious and governmental establishment of Jerusalem said much the same thing about that “outside agitator”, Jesus of Nazareth, when he and his rag tag group of followers showed up at the city gates at the beginning of the Passover celebration, a time when the city was jammed with pilgrims from throughout Israel; also a time of great tension between the Roman occupiers and the Jewish population. Not hard to imagine the authorities looking at Jesus and thinking, “Here comes some trouble we don’t need.”

Let’s think for a moment about just what Jesus was walking into on that first Palm Sunday. Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg describe the scene in Jerusalem with these words: “Two processions entered Jerusalem at the beginning of the week of Passover, a tinderbox time in the city, with the Jewish people celebrating divine deliverance from the past Egyptian Empire while occupied and oppressed under the very present Roman Empire...And so, at each Passover, the Roman governor – Pilate in the time of Jesus – rode up to Jerusalem from the imperial capital of Caesarea on the coast at the head of a cohort of imperial cavalry and troops to reinforce the Roman garrison in Jerusalem as a deterrent against and preparation for any possible trouble. Pilate’s procession, arriving from the west, symbolized and actualized Roman imperial power.

“Jesus entered the city from the east in another procession, a counter-procession. Whereas Pilate rode into the city on a war horse, Jesus entered on a donkey. Mark makes it clear that Jesus planned it in advance. He tells the disciples to go into a village to get a donkey. Implicitly the symbolism makes use of Zechariah 9:9-10, which speaks of a king of peace on a donkey who will banish the war horse and battle bow from the land.”

The contrast is clear: Jesus versus Pilate, the non-violence of the kingdom of God versus the violence of empire. Two arrivals, two entrances, two processions: Jesus...taking the risk of going up to Jerusalem to confront the powers that be, to confront a social order in which the well-born, well-connected and well-paid held all the strings, to confront and turn upside down accepted conventional understandings of power and prestige and to proclaim a whole new way of living and being. Essentially, Jesus leading a protest march, demanding change. But really, who do he and his followers think they are kidding? What difference do they realistically hope to make? He doesn’t stand a chance....right?

At the retirement dinner for a much beloved and respected pastor, after everyone had offered tributes to this man and his ministry, he rose to speak in response. His first words were, “I want to thank Jesus Christ for making me into the person I am. Without Jesus, I might have been normal.” He had a point. He might very well have been talking about Palm Sunday. What is normal about picking up palm branches and following this Jew on a donkey into Jerusalem where both the political and religious systems are quite prepared, indeed eager, to do away with him once and for all?

You want normal? I’ll give you normal. I shared this with our Lenten meditation group last Wednesday. Did you know that there is a church that calls itself “Winners Church”? It now has

branches – franchises? – in 32 countries. According to its leaders, the church lives by a simple motto, one coming straight out of American culture: “Be happy. Be successful. Join the winners.” Follow Jesus and be a winner; follow Jesus and find material and personal success. People are flocking to the church. It’s very American, but is it Jesus? I guess it all depends on how you define winning. And right here is where Palm Sunday and Holy Week get a little tough, a bit abnormal. Compared to Pilate and his legions, does Jesus look like a winner to you? Not hard to imagine our Sebastopol, non-church friends, saying to us, and maybe they already have, “You would have to be crazy to follow this guy...or at least, not normal.”

“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant...Those who want to save their lives will lose them and those who lose their lives for my sake will find them.” Again, is this how winners talk? Why follow this guy, especially when we know where his path is taking him? I think of that nun, fingering the cross around her neck even as she complained about outside agitators unnecessarily riling people up. What if Jesus had followed her advice, had turned away when he reached the gates of Jerusalem, and gone back to carpentry? Would we even know his name?

Tom Long, a distinguished teacher of preaching and quite a preacher himself, in the week after 9/11, was asked to join two other national religious leaders on a radio talk show to discuss how their faith responded to the horrific events of that day. They would have about a minute to respond via telephone.

The show began and the host said, “Dr. Long, you are a pastor. What does the Christian faith have to say about those who did these terrible acts?”

Long says that he mumbled something like, “Well, our faith teaches us that we are all sinners in need of forgiveness, and that Jesus came among us to save sinners. In every situation, the Christian faith teaches us to look for God’s will, to see reconciliation and redemption. We can understand evil because we know we all commit evil....”

Long’s minute was up so the host turned to the next religious leader on the program. He began by saying, “Let me say that I think that what Rev. Long just said was the worst thing I ever heard. The people who did this were inhuman and evil. We need to find them and punish them without any of this redemption business.”

Long says that at that moment, it struck him how very strange it is to be somebody trying to follow Jesus. (By the way, I hope we and our community can remember Tom Long’s words about forgiveness, reconciliation and redemption as we together struggle over the future of Palm Drive Hospital!)

When I first took preaching classes in seminary, back when dinosaurs walked the earth and we actually used *typewriters*, I was told something like this: when you preach, you try to reduce the gap between the congregation and the gospel. You start with the Bible here, then reach out through clever stories, illustrations, even the daily newspaper, to bring it closer to the people over there...in the pews. The preacher’s job is to close the gap between sophisticated, educated, contemporary Christians and God’s word.

Not bad advice. And I often try to do just that on a Sunday. But maybe not today. No, on this Sunday, with Jesus coming into Jerusalem, coming face to face with those who would destroy him, perhaps my role as preacher is, rather than try to close the gap between us and him, to point out the vast difference between us and him. He has chosen this unconventional path, this alternative wisdom, and he will not make accommodation, he will not be deterred. And, said the late, great Michael Yaconelli, “Those of us who have heard the haunting sound of Jesus’ voice, those who sense life and hope and adventure in the gospel, those who are willing to speak up, to question the deadness around us, to express our desire for life, we must not keep quiet, even if everyone around us tell us we are crazy.”

For it just might be that Palm Sunday names something about our faith, about our journey. It says that amid struggle, anguish, denial and forgetfulness, we still have this wild and soaring anticipation, a vision of a new way, a glimpse of a new world. And so it is we continue to follow the One on the donkey and stubbornly continue to cry out for the triumph of human hope and godly grace.