

The Wrong Son of God

Matthew 27:11-26

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I.

Our Gospel story this morning began with a parade.

Actually, it wasn't a parade in the way we think of parades.

There were no floats or large character balloons.

There was no corporate sponsorship or coordinated media coverage.

The organizers were not paid professionals.

They were men, women, maybe even children who had joined the Galilean peasant movement that surrounded Jesus of Nazareth.

Their movement had begun about 100 miles to the north.

As the week of Passover drew near, the widening band of followers approached the Holy City of Jerusalem.

They rested in the villages of Bethany and Bethphage, traditional last stops for pilgrims, located on the Mount of Olives just east of the city.

One spring morning, some of Jesus' disciples acquire a donkey and its colt, laying their cloaks on them.

A large crowd gathers. The people take their outer cloaks off and they them on the road.

They cut branches from the trees and lay those on the road.

Then they shout words from scripture.

"Hosanna," they shout. It's a word from Psalm 118 that means "save us, we pray."

Quoting the same psalm, they shout, perhaps sing, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

Are you getting the sense that this is a strange kind of parade?

Have you figured out yet that this so-called procession is in fact a bit of

street theater, an impromptu expression of the people's joy and expectation.

But what was the purpose? What point was Jesus and his followers trying to make.

Some scholars such as Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan have suggested that there was another parade into Jerusalem that day.

From the west, Pontius Pilate, Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria entered Jerusalem on a war horse at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers.

Pilate's presence, the means of his arrival, and the timing of his entrance to the city was no accident.

This was the first day of the week of Passover, the Jewish festival celebrating liberation from an oppressive power.

As the current occupiers of Jerusalem, Rome's message was, "Go ahead and have your festival, but watch yourselves, and don't get out of line."

It was a tense time and peace was delicately balanced.

Jewish armed rebellions were increasing and the Roman empire was tightening its grip.

Would this be the year the tensions would boil over?

Two parades. On the west side, a macho show of imperial strength. A puppet governor on a war horse.

On the east, a Galilean peasant rides a mama donkey in a choreographed lampoon of empire, a symbolic proclamation that the kingdom of heaven is drawing near.

These two processions embody the conflict at the center of that very first Holy Week.

II.

Perhaps it was inevitable that that parade would lead to confrontation.

At the end of the parade, Jesus entered the Temple where he drove out the merchants and overturned their tables, exposing the ways in which the practice of religion had collaborated with the empire to oppress the poor.

It is not surprising that these actions led to Jesus' arrest.

In Matthew 27, Jesus appears as a prisoner before the governor Pilate.

In a sense, this is where the two parades collide.

As we read this scene, it is really important to acknowledge that these verses have often been used by Christians throughout history to cast blame for Jesus' death on "the Jews" and to exonerate the role of Pilate and the Roman Empire he served.

When Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" he is assuming that Jesus seeks a political title meant for one who intends to overthrow the Roman occupiers.

Jesus' response, "You say so," leaves Pilate to figure out an answer to his own question.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the last "King of the Jews" was King Herod back in chapter 2.

Having read the Gospel all the way through, we know that Jesus is a Jew, that is, a Son of David, but that he does not seek to be a "King of the Jews" ala Herod.

At this point in the trial, the chief priests and the elders accuse him of assuming this title, but Jesus gives no answer.

And why would he? A trial such as this does not even pretend to provide a fair hearing. It is a farce, and Jesus silence refuses to provide them any more ammunition against him.

If they're going to find him guilty, they'll have to find the justification on their own. And keep in mind that the chief priests and elders were part of priestly class, mostly Saducees, who were collaborators with Rome and did not represent the vast majority of Jews.

These elite religious leaders wanted to keep the peace with Pilate and were willing to sacrifice a fellow Jew in order to keep it.

Pilate wanted the same thing.

There is no historical evidence that there was a practice of releasing a prisoner at Passover, but it could have been Pilate's prerogative to do so.

III.

The text tells us there was another Jew in custody, a notorious prisoner named Jesus Barabbas.

Do you hear the juxtaposition?

There are two Jesuses in custody – Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus Barabbas, one the leader of a non-violent peasant movement, the other a notorious prisoner, likely a violent insurrectionist.

Pilate, seeking to save his political hide by using violence to assuage his collaborators, offers to release one of the prisoners.

Historically, pro-Roman, anti-Jewish Christians have suggested that Pilate would just have assumed release Jesus of Nazareth but that the Jews insisted on Barabbas.

This ignores the fact that Pilate only wants what will get him through the Passover tension and that Pilate only knows one way to bring the peace, and that is the way of violence.

In this sense, the way of Pilate and the way the religious elites and the way of Barabbas are all the same – salvation through violence.

The oddball in this scene is Jesus the Jew from Nazareth, the unarmed peasant, the healer of disease, the champion of the poor, the proclaimer of God's kingdom come near.

At this point in the narrative, another of Matthew's themes makes a final appearance. In the story of Jesus' birth, Joseph, has a dream letting him know that his fiancée Mary is pregnant.

In the dream, an angel tells him not to dismiss Mary, but to marry her and to raise the son as his own, which he does.

Later, strangers from the East who have come to honor the child Jesus are warned in a dream to avoid Herod's wrath by traveling home by another route.

Here, during Jesus' trial, we learn that Pilate's wife has had a dream about Jesus' innocence and that she tells her husband to release the Nazarene.

Again, Christians have used this as a way to prove that Pilate knew Jesus was innocent, but that he was powerless to save him.

But the text doesn't say anything like that. Pilate gives his wife no response.

Instead, here is another example of an extreme outsider, a Gentile, a woman, who bears witness to Jesus' righteousness, that is, to his rootedness in the Jewish tradition and his resolve to do the right thing.

Rather than being anti-Jewish, Jesus, throughout the Gospel of Matthew, is presented as the embodiment of Jewish righteousness.

"I did not come to abolish the Law and Prophets," Matthew's Jesus tells his adversaries, "I came to fulfill them."

Jesus came to fulfill the law, specifically the Deuteronomic law that required the people to care for the widow, the orphan, and immigrant stranger.

And Jesus came to fulfill the work of the prophets who were so deeply Jewish that they couldn't allow rich and powerful Jews to continue oppressing anyone who was marginalized.

I'm reminded of Rev. Jeremiah Wright who incurred the wrath of all "good" Christians when he indicted America for perpetuating racial and economic inequality with the words "God damn America."

Out of context, these words were confusing and offensive.

Heard within the context of his sermon and as an expression of the tradition of prophetic preaching, Rev. Wright's words, while harsh, reflected an angry righteousness, an act of resistance to status quo oppression.

IV.

In the end, Jesus is found guilty; that is, Pilate and his collaborators, along with a blood-thirsty mob, decide to release Jesus Barabbas instead of Jesus of Nazareth. In the clash of two parades, the war horse defeats the burro; the cavalry beats the sandaled peasants; the soldiers with swords beat the children with branches; the collaborators beat the righteous.

I once preached that the crowd that welcomed Jesus on Palm Sunday was the same crowd that called for his crucifixion on Friday.

Now I'm not so sure that's true.

I think they are two different crowds and that Matthew is asking us to identify with one of them.

In other words, which "Son of God" will we choose?

After Jesus breathes his last, another outsider, the Roman centurion, is the first person to confess, "This man was a Son of God."

But there's also a "Son of God" in the story of Jesus' trial, and it's not Jesus of Nazareth.

Barabbas, that name, means "bar" son, "abbas," God.

The mob who sought to keep the peace through violence chose Jesus Barabbas, the Son of God.

Will we do the same? Which will we choose? Which crowd will we join? In which parade will we participate?

While you're considering your options, especially in light of the defeat Jesus of Nazareth and his followers suffer at his trial, I will simply point out, while Friday is an important part of the story, the story doesn't end on Friday.

Amen.