

March 28, 2015
Falcon Heights Church, UCC
Falcon Heights, MN
The Rev. Anne Swallow Gillis

Palm Sunday
Mark 11:1-11
Philippians 2:5-11

THIS JOURNEY WITH JESUS

Palm fronds: potent symbols of all far-away places sunny and warm. We finger these slender, fibrous pieces of greenery, and might imagine a large, ancient city under bright springtime sunshine. It's the annual spring festival of the Jewish Passover and people are pouring in from the surrounding towns and countryside. They stream toward the Holy City to celebrate the "passing over" of the angels of death in long-ago Egypt. They will remember their ancestors' escape from slavery under the oppressive Pharaoh, the long journey through the wilderness to land in which future generations now dwell. Celebrating Passover in Jerusalem would have been a lifelong dream and people pour into the city from the countryside. Adults, children are tired but eager as they round the Mount of Olives and catch their first sight of the glowing city. They are awestruck by the four miles of encircling stone wall, and there in the middle of the city are the shining gold-embellished walls of the giant Temple.

The industrious Roman-puppet King Herod has been hard at work transforming this place for over 30 years by the time these celebrants arrive. A Jewish leader despised by his own people, Herod fawns for his Roman superiors. Prestige and power are everything: He builds palaces, citadels, amphitheater, viaducts, public monuments. Herod hugely expands their center of worship, the Temple. All to gain prominence and esteem in the eyes of the occupying Roman Empire. But grand and beautiful as it is, this is a city on edge. Jerusalem residents and visitors alike are straining under the increasing tax burden and the offensive, idol-worshipping presence of Rome and its minions. After several centuries of prosperity and autonomy following the Babylonian exile, times have changed. Since Alexander the Great's conquest in the 4th century BC, their spiritual home has been *occupied* by idolaters. No one knew when a statue of a Greek or Roman god might be installed in the Temple, or when there would be new restrictions on the people's ability to adhere to the Torah, their law and their joy. This is what it is like to live in an *alienated homeland* (see Paula Fredriksen, "From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus," 1988). With Roman occupation, the Jewish people become convinced that the government and major institutions seek to insidiously thwart their religious practices and destroy their way of life. They long for a restoration of autonomy, religious freedom and justice. A natural, and understandable, hope for people all over the world, even today.

This is the Jerusalem Jesus and his disciples are approaching on what we now call Palm Sunday. A Jerusalem where Jewish leaders are worried about

stability and safety for their people and where Roman authorities are beefing up security. Biblical scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan have studied this period in Jerusalem's history, and wrote a book entitled "The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem" (2007). They suggest that there very well might have been two processions entering Jerusalem on that fateful day. This one we just heard about from the Gospel of Mark, coming from the east, mostly peasant farmer types who have followed Jesus into town. Jesus sitting astride a donkey colt and riding through one of the city gates, with the people crying out "Hosanna," Aramaic for "Save us, we pray." "Save us from *what?*" we might wonder. From sin? From the Romans?

One thing is clear: everyday people are having a rough go and want things to change. They are searching for meaning to their present suffering and are desperately hoping for a changed future. The crowds wave palms, throw down cloaks and branches at Jesus' feet, identifying him a Messianic figure that will bring a new era of peace, justice....and vanquished Romans. They want their Jerusalem and their Temple back and the Romans gone.

Borg and Crossan have suggested the possibility of another, simultaneous procession entering from the west, at the opposite end of the city: the Roman governor of the region, Pontius Pilate, and his entourage. We might picture him summoned from his seaside villa in the administrative capital at Caesarea Maritima by his Roman superiors. I can't imagine Pilate being very excited to make this inland journey (really, Pilate, you ought to get down there for the Festival of Passover! Bring a visible display of law and order to that city; place is crawling with riff-raff, brazen preachers and healers and possibly armed rebels lurking about; make a big statement, Pilate – imperial cavalry and tough-looking soldiers and all that!). What a contrast: Through one gate, imperial power and might, swords and snapping flags, prancing steeds and armored soldiers. Shock and Awe. Impressive. Through another gate, excited but weary commoners on foot, a preacher/healer man on a donkey. Not so impressive.

We begin to get a sense of how Jesus' audiences resonated with his preaching that the Kingdom of God was at hand. They would have understood him primarily through the lens and the longings of this very prevalent theology of restoration (see Paula Fredriksen). It had evolved into a hope for universal renewal; a restored Israel *and* a wider world of morally transformed, non-idol worshipping Gentiles. Prophetic visioning began to happen all over the place, including zealots and insurrectionists embracing guerrilla warfare, believing they were living in the last days, and preparing for the coming Kingdom of God. Charismatic healers and miracle workers, exorcists abounded. They were all performing signs and wonders that were a signal both of their intimacy with God and as pointing to the End Times. Jesus steps onto this stage with a call for a wider type of communal and spiritual restoration than anyone could imagine. And his vision and actions set him on a collision course with authorities that find his call to restoration unsettling, even dangerous, for an occupied nation.

Suddenly, in the pressing bodies crowding through the city gate, someone shouts, "There he is! Look, the teacher and healer from Nazareth...he raises the dead, he confronts the authorities!" Another chimes in, "Surely he is the Messiah about whom our prophets speak!" But Jesus doesn't ride a horse. He rides a donkey. In ancient Israel the kings would ride a horse off to war, and a donkey to signify they came in peace. Is this street theater? A parody? This is the man who is to go head to head with the Roman powers? Where is his power?

Years ago, everyone seemed to be reading the book written by a Jewish rabbi, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" (Harold S. Kushner, 1981). The author's son had suffered terribly and died from a childhood disease. When faced with such suffering, Rabbi Kushner found himself questioning God's reality. He wrote that our claims about God could end up contradicting each other if we aren't careful. He challenged the notion that God is both all-loving and all-powerful. In Rabbi Kushner's mind, God cannot be both. How could someone all-powerful and all-loving, allow people to suffer? Kushner leaned towards affirming God's love and facing the fact that God appears to limit God's power among us. I find this a compelling view. It has helped me better understand what Jesus was doing that day he entered Jerusalem.

What is God's power really about? Jesus rides in on a lowly donkey. Pontius Pilate rides in on a huge, mighty steed. I would say that these are *both* power statements. And there is something oddly subversive about this Jesus entry, if you ask me. Or perhaps I should say, Jesus is purposely revealing the subversive nature of his own Kingship. The real power, God's power, is not about force, bigness, shock and awe. God's power intentionally self-limits. God's domain is about self-giving. Empowering peace. Compassion and mercy.

A few decades later, the early Christian teacher and apostle Paul will write a letter to his church at Philippi. Reading through this short letter, one quickly gets a sense that this church had some serious internal power issues. They were constantly haggling over who gets to decide what, whose opinion matters the most, who wields the most influence in the congregation's decisions. Church conflict is apparently as old as the church! In his letter to this first-century congregation, Paul encourages his people to "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." We may hear this as: "Now I want you all to agree on church doctrine and there will be no variation or theological diversity!" But I don't think this is what Paul is describing. As we read on in the letter, Paul speaks of how Jesus "emptied himself." Paul says that Jesus was "taking the form of a slave...humbling himself, becoming obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross." Does this reveal something to us about God's power? Perhaps God's most powerful aspect is God's self-giving to us, out of God's Self? A God who empties out God-self for all that is not-God. Not-God. That would be all of creation, humanity, us. "Have this kind of mind," writes Paul, of self-emptying and humility among you.

Our lives do sometimes feel like an “alienated land” and we long for a sense of power, control, visible restoration. We get confused, dismayed by the paradoxical kind of power which Jesus taught and enacted in his life. The thought of humbling ourselves, pouring ourselves out, seems counter-intuitive. Yet God calls us to hope for and work for a changed future in this kind of servant mode. I wonder how might we talk about these challenges in an even deeper way together at Falcon Heights Church? What might this kind of self-emptying power look like among us, as we be church together?

The ambiguity and turbulence of Holy Week brings complicated themes of life and death. It confronts us again with the question of God’s powerful and restorative presence in the midst of human suffering. Always the realist, Jesus knew it is not enough for us to simply lead decent lives. There he is, ahead of us: humbling himself, emptying himself, obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Holy Week lies before us; let us follow Jesus together, *through* Jerusalem toward Easter. Amen.