

## Consequences

Series: Living the Vision: Pathways of Peace, Ephesians 4: 24

You know the story. It was a motley parade through the back gate of Jerusalem. Small crowds of people were shouting *Hosanna! Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord.* Many were waving palm branches and throwing cloaks on the road in front of the object of their adulation. That would be Jesus the itinerant teacher, prophet, possible Messiah, and troublemaker. For his entry into Jerusalem, this triumphant procession, he was riding on a donkey.

We still celebrate *Palm Sunday* today by waving palm and singing Hosanna. This is how we begin our observance of Holy Week, the final week of Jesus' life and ministry. This was the week that ended with Jesus hanging on a Roman cross – executed, dead.

So, our observance of Palm Sunday begins with great celebration, excitement, and joy. Then, it moves toward passion with the realization that the road Jesus followed led to Calvary and the cross. Following that path, the tone of our worship moves toward somber reflection.

This week of observance here at Crossroads Church includes a Seder meal, commemorating the Last Supper, and a Good Friday service of darkness. In remembrance, we walk through Holy Week.

There are two problems with Palm Sunday: one with its setting in the New Testament and the other with how we usually think of it. Palm Sunday is set in springtime in all the gospel accounts. It is near Passover and serves as a gateway to Holy Week. In reality, palms were not a spring foliage in Jerusalem. They were frequently used as part of a fall festival. So, the historical event behind Palm Sunday probably took place months before Passover. The theological significance of the event as set in the gospels is clearly related to Holy Week. It marks the deterioration of an already testy relationship with the religious and political leadership, leading to Jesus' execution.

The second problem with Palm Sunday is our interpretation of the triumphal entry. It was not a Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Nor was it the slightly more humble St. Patrick's Day parade in Kansas City. It was not even the North Kansas City Snake parade.

Jesus' triumphal entry was definitely not a pageant rivaling the entrance of Caesar into Rome or even of the Roman governor into Jerusalem for Passover. It was, in truth, a very humble event, intended to contrast Jesus' *Kingdom of God* with that of Rome.

Jesus was a prophet in Israel, following in the line of Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others. Like them, he came to the people of Israel with a two-part message from God. He proclaimed that the existing powers that be were finished. Their age was done. They might not be aware of it, but they were dead on the inside with the rotting well advanced. All that was left was the dying.

He also proclaimed that a new age begun, a new reality that was God-birther and seen in Jesus. This was a new consciousness, counter to the ways of Caesar – the ways of political, military, and ecclesiastical power. This was a kingdom of love, *Shalom*, justice, and equity.

The prophets of Israel often delivered their message in poetry or parables. These were usually spoken and sometimes acted out. Jeremiah once purchased some land near Jerusalem even as the armies of Babylon laid siege at her gates. On this occasion, his proclamation was a message of hope, a promise that the people would one day return from exile and again live in this land.

Palm Sunday's parade was this same type of acted-out parable. Jesus illustrated that there was a new kingdom in town – not of military might, political power, or ecclesiastical pomp. This was a new kingdom of humility, a kingdom for the marginalized and all who find our place with them.

That was the message of Palm Sunday, a message that so angered the political and religious leaders of Jerusalem that it led to Jesus' execution. He knew it would. At some level, Jesus must have known he was walking into the lions' den and spitting in their faces.

And if that were not clear enough, after the parade Jesus went to the Temple and declared its destruction. He told everyone about the in-breaking new kingdom of God and that the new age was now among them. Is it any wonder why Jesus was killed?

Now, you know Jesus' actions would have consequences. He must have known it. He clearly feared it and resolutely faced it. His actions had consequences and so do ours. Now we turn to second scripture for today. (Ephesians 4, beginning with verses 17 & 18)

And so I insist—and God backs me up on this—that there be no going along with the crowd, the empty-headed, mindless crowd. They've refused for so long to deal with God that they've lost touch not only with God, but with reality itself." [Then to verses 22-24] -- "Everything—and I do mean everything—connected with that old way of life has to go. It's rotten through and through. Get rid of it! And then take on an entirely new way of life—a God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you." (the Message)

Another translation reads, "clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." (NRSV). These new clothes are the new self -- the really true self, you and me as God made us to be – in the image and likeness of God.

Being made in the image of God is not to be a source of ego satisfaction and pride. It shouldn't cause us to live separated from others who see life differently. It should be the motivation to find and cultivate in our lives that nature living deep within in of each. The holiness to which we are called is to be motivated from within by a higher calling to love, peace, and compassion. Our calling to righteousness is to work for justice, to stake our lives with attitude and action reflecting a belief that while any of our sisters and brothers in the world are poor, suffering, oppressed, or forgotten, we too are poor, suffering, oppressed, and forgotten.

The vision that guided Jesus cost him his life. He faced the consequences for challenging the powers of his day. Many of his early and latter day followers also have faced very real and very challenging consequences. We too face them when we follow the same vision of *Shalom* we see in Jesus' life.

- What will it mean for you to follow the vision of Shalom in your life: to challenge the powers of our day and invest your life in peace and justice?
- What consequences do you see yourself facing?
- What will it mean for this congregation to follow the vision of Shalom in our attitudes and actions: to challenge the powers of our day and invest our shared life in peace and justice?
- What consequences do you see us facing?

We live in a world dominated by the same powers Jesus faced. In many ways, we are beholden to these powers for our livelihoods. We count on these powers to protect us from

foreign and domestic enemies. They give many of us comfortable and relatively secure lives. They reassure us that we're on the right side.

Jesus' vision of *Shalom* tells us a different story. The security we seek is no security. The sure answers we desire of smokescreens. When we work so hard to keep God in a box, we're forgetting that God is free. God is in the air we all breathe. God's love surrounds all people. This is the message Jesus brought us.

The Bible talks about sin and we struggle with that idea – sometimes jumping right to that questionable concept of original sin. But the idea of sin is a valid one and applies to all of us. Sin is what separates us from God, what keeps us trapped and seemingly unable to live our lives fully and with abundance. We can find ourselves weighed down by traditions – the message of “ought to,” “should have,” and “that's not the way we did it at...” On the other hand, we can find ourselves so reactive to traditions, so hurt by oppressive ways the Christian message has been perverted by the church over the centuries, that we are ready to discard the whole thing and follow either a more rational or a more spiritual path.

Jesus' followers had problem after his death. True Messiahs are not executed and crucifixion was such a shameful way to die. It tainted Jesus' memory for many people and his followers really struggled to understand why this had happened. Those early Christians were also Jews and so used the frame of reference most familiar to them. They understood Jesus' death as a ritual sacrifice made to reconcile us with God.

That understanding would have been very meaningful to first-century Jews, but the divergence of Judaism and Christianity began to separate this interpretation of Jesus' death from its Jewish roots in the Temple cult of sacrifices. Over the centuries, Christianity has developed its own cultic understanding of Jesus' death -- that it was a ritual of sacrifice to appease God's judgment and condemnation of humanity.

To question this interpretation of Jesus' death, even today, is seen by many as questioning the heart of Christian faith. But many do question this interpretation as the only way to understand what happened on the cross. They question that God needs to have this type of sacrifice in order to forgive people of sin and to bring about reconciliation between humanity and eternity. There are other understandings, other interpretations that have been offered, by minority voices, over the centuries as well.

Ultimately, I find deep meaning in the cross as a sign of Jesus' great faith in God, as a symbol of how costly true love can be, and as a warning of how painful is the dying of the present age. I see in the cross as well a sign of hope. A new day has dawned and we are called to live in its light. The cross is a paradoxical reminder of the freedom to which the Spirit calls us – the freedom to find abundance in the giving of our spiritual gifts, the freedom to reach the potential that lies within us, and the freedom to move through our fear to the faith that brings new life to the world. We find this freedom revealed in Jesus. May others find it revealed through us!