

Days of Passion

Mark 11: 1-11

They were days of triumph and days of passion as a ragtag band of peasants challenged the mighty Roman Empire, not with spears or chariots, but with ideas, idealism, and passion. It was not a revolution of violence, but it was a certainly was a revolution. And it was put down by violent means.

What was going on with Jesus at Palm Sunday and during Holy Week? What we see on full display was the passion of Jesus for justice, equity, inclusion, and true peace. By the end of the week, that passion had become a Passion of suffering and blood. And the ragtag followers failed to follow and Jesus was crucified. Holy week is sometimes called Passion Week. It was a crucible of days in the life of Jesus that revealed his true passion and invites us to own our own.

Palm Sunday is all about a parade. Really, it is about two parades, two processions that happened at about the same time. Jesus led a procession riding a donkey with peasants cheering and waving palm branches. One would think it was a curious entrance into Jerusalem unless one were as familiar with the Bible as most Jews of the day. They would have recognized Jesus acting out the words of the prophet Zechariah (9: 9-10 NRSV):

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

The procession was a not so triumphant entry through the back gate of Jerusalem. But it was one of two processions. The other one came through the front gate – the procession of the Roman legion with Pontius Pilate at the head, a procession on war horses, wearing armor, and carrying spears and swords. They were coming to Jerusalem for Passover to control the troublemakers with a show of force and, if necessary, the reality of force. Jesus was sending an unlikely message about the confrontation of two kingdoms in conflict -- Rome, represented by Pilate and the Roman legion vs. the kingdom of God, represented by Jesus riding on a donkey and peasants waving palms.

Roman power was legitimized by Roman Imperial theology. In language we've come to associate with Jesus and the Kingdom of God, the Emperor was called the son of God and also lord, savior, and the one who brought peace on earth. It was not a coincidence that these titles were used by the early church for Jesus. Speaking of Jesus as Son of God simply means that it was Jesus, not Caesar, who was Son of God. Therefore God's kingdom, represented by Jesus, not Caesar's kingdom represented by Pilate and the legion, was the legitimate one. When we say "I believe Jesus is the son of God," it means that we choose the Kingdom brought by Jesus over the powers of domination in the world today.

Jesus brought an alternative vision that challenged the powers of Rome and the leadership of the Jewish Temple. That confrontation shaped the last week of his life. He brought the vision into

Jerusalem, the center of Jewish faith that had become the center of collaboration with Rome. The temple was in Jerusalem and, in Jesus' day, the temple was the center of the tax system. It was the center of exploitation as priestly families took land away from people through debt foreclosure. Jesus was challenging the role of the Temple as the center of that local Domination system. He called the temple to repent, literally to return from exile and return as the center of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus' invitation was to the people, especially the poor and powerless who listened to his message, to follow him on the Way to Jerusalem to challenge the authorities. He invited them to join him in what amounted to a non-violent revolution in the name of God. It was a revolution against the way the Temple leaders were collaborating with Rome to oppress the poor.

By the end of Holy week, the followers of Jesus had no stomach for his revolution. One betrayed him. One denied him. All of them deserted him and Jesus died a revolutionary's death – crucifixion. His blood was poured out in love for God and for humanity. His body was broken in faith, pointing the Way and showing the true cost of love. Jesus is still inviting each of us to walk that revolutionary way.

What does this mean today? What does it mean for us? As a society, it means we need to recognize in what ways we are a domination system ourselves and begin to let go placing our primary faith in the power of weapons and of balancing prosperity on the backs of the poorest and least powerful among us. We need to place our trust once again in the ideals of our founding – justice for all.

As a congregation, Jesus' invitation means that we must recognize our prophetic role and exercise our prophetic voice on behalf of the disenfranchised and the outcast. It means we need to be advocates for the dream of God, that all creation be one and that all people be included and embraced in the love and the life of God.

For us as individuals, we need to respond to the call to follow the way of Jesus. This means not to settle for placing Jesus on a pedestal to worship him, but to follow his example by challenging oppressive and unjust structures. It also means to welcome his presence as a companion in our lives.

I have never been what you'd consider a revolutionary-type person. I like to get along with people and revolutionaries tend to offend people. Any dreams I ever had to change the world were either childhood dreams of being famous and successful or thoughts of bringing the world together in wonder and appreciation at something I had accomplished. Even the motivation I felt to go into ministry was not so much to change the world, but the conviction that this career probably fit me the best. It provided an opportunity to do all the things I did well and loved to do.

I thought about changing the world through my work in terms of touching individual people, encouraging and helping them through life, and helping provide good and positive experiences for them at church. I have to say that I still live out of that dream. I love opportunities to work with individual people, to teach and help them figure things out whether in a class, through a

sermon, as part of a choir or theater company, in a work group, or just by talking. And that does change the world a little at a time. I affirm this dream that still calls to me. Now there is more that seems to call to me. There is an invitation to action in my life. Now I think I understand more clearly what Jesus was trying to teach all of us, especially during his days of passion.

Powers and systemic forces are at work in the world today just as in Jesus' day. Religious and political leaders still encourage the divisions and intolerance that keep us from achieving the dream of unity and peace in the world. And while it is probably true that we have more enlightened forms of government today, public officials still give in to corruption. Leader after leader participates in continuing or even deepening the oppression of poor people. Leader after leader is seduced by military power and the belief that we can bring peace through war. Even those of us who, though far from wealthy, have some means still tend to view the poor, people of other races and cultures, or the stranger as threats to us. And we tend to view those in leadership as our models. But it is not necessarily so.

God's invitation to you and to me, an invitation so clearly extended through Jesus, is to work to change the system of status quo. To do this requires sacrifice. The cross shows us clearly how much commitment it takes to change the world. The voice of Jesus still calls us to follow, to take up the way of the cross by finding our ultimate loyalty in the Kingdom of God rather than in the Kingdom of Caesar.

A good way to start to follow is by confessing to yourself, "I am a unique and valued child of God. What I value most in life are the priorities Jesus taught. I want to live with love, be light in the darkest places, be freedom where people are most imprisoned, and be compassion where people feel despair." Start there and begin a journey that will change your life and change the world.

We are people of the back gate, people who value the palms more than the power – people who find life by laying it down and giving it away. Mother Teresa said, "none of us can do great things, only small things with great love." Now some may do great things, but all of us can live with great love. There is immense potential in each of us to change the world when we hold ourselves in the flow of the Spirit. There is immense potential in Christian congregations to change the world when they work in concert with the Spirit. We will all fail, but the disciples who failed Jesus at the end of his days of passion became the pillars of the church that shared his story around the world.

There is no fear of failure when we step out and commit our lives to to change the world. In that very commitment, we scatter the seeds that will grow into new life for ourselves and for those who follow us. The presence of the living Christ is with us even through the valley of the shadow of death, and always, even to the end of the age .