

The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday
March 25, 2018
Mark 11:1-11/ 14:1-15:47
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Two processions. Two kingdoms. Two journeys into Jerusalem. Authors Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan contend in their book *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem*, that at the beginning of the week of celebration of the Feast of the Passover in the year 30, there were two parades happening. One procession entered from the east end of the city of Jerusalem. This one was a parade of peasants, with Jesus riding down from the Mount of Olives on a donkey, cheered by his followers. He was from the village of Nazareth and his followers were mostly peasants. They had come from Galilee, about a hundred miles to the north. His followers had high expectations for Jesus, hoping against hope that he was about to finally overthrow the oppressive occupying forces of Rome, and return Jerusalem and its people to their days of former glory, days like those when King David reigned.

On the opposite end of the city, coming in from the west was another parade. This one was led by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea and Samaria. Pilate rode in at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. It was standard practice for the Roman governors of Judea to be in Jerusalem for the major Jewish festivals. Not out of any particular support for the religious observances of the Jews, but to be in the city in case there was trouble. And sometimes there was, especially during the Passover. [*The Last Week*, p.2].

Crossan and Borg describe Pilate's imperial procession arriving in the city. Imagine it. "A visual display of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. And the sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. And the swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers. Some curious, some awed, some resentful." [p.3].

This week we call "holy" is about the direct clashing of two kingdoms: the kingdom of worldly empire and the kingdom of God. The kingdom of worldly empire rules by political oppression, economic exploitation, and religious legitimization. In ancient societies the ruling systems were justified with religious language. The king who ruled by divine right (i.e., God given right) was considered the "Son of God". Whatever form the social order took, it reflected the will of God, and the powers that be were believed to be ordained of God. Rule by a domination system is how the world works. It is the normal way the world operates. We know it well – the greedy amassing of wealth,

threat and intimidation, power, control, military might. There is always a hierarchy: a few people with the bulk of power at the top, and the majority of the population at the bottom. Sometimes there is a small minority group in the “moveable middle”. This is how we live. It’s just the normal way of the world, business as usual. But it is not what God intends. It is not God’s desire or design for the world.

The other kingdom – the kingdom of God - operates in ways directly opposite to the kingdom of empire. Mercy and justice with peace mark the kingdom of God. Trust, radical and universal freedom, compassion, and courage are the ways life is lived in the kingdom of God. According to Mark’s gospel, this is what Jesus was most passionate about: the kingdom of God and concern for God’s justice, especially among the devout religious.

To follow Jesus “on the way” – another prominent theme in Mark - is not primarily about worshiping Jesus, though worship does happen. The word “Hosanna” means “save us”. Save us? From what? From foreign domination? From the ways of living we consider normal, our basic human condition focused on self-preservation, self-protection, selfishness? Save us from slavery to pride, power, position, perfection? Yes! Save us. Save us and set us free to return to our proper God-ordered ways of living humbly, honestly and vulnerably, in goodness and kindness, with justice and peace.

To walk the way of the cross through Holy Week reminds us that Jesus’ way is a way of downward mobility. It is counter-cultural. Though we love and long for a good “rags to riches” story, God’s story of Jesus’ come to save us is not about going from “rags to riches”. For Jesus it is the other way ‘round – as that early Christian hymn in Philippians describes it – Jesus moves from the glory of direct communion with divine goodness, love and light, and empties himself - not holding tightly to all that goodness, love and light for himself. He comes to be with us, one of us on earth – right down into our “me-centered”, materialistic driven, mean-spirited and fear-laden mess and mayhem. God loves us so much, that God does not leave us to our own devices. God loves us too much to leave us where God finds us. So Jesus comes to love, lift, and restore us to our first love, God.

But it is so much easier to live with a Jesus we can simply worship, rather than follow a Jesus who calls for nonviolent and risky engagement against real, “this world” injustice. But we didn’t get the Jesus we want, a Jesus to be worshiped. We got the Jesus we need – a Jesus to be followed.

The Jesus we get is so very human. After his entry into Jerusalem Sunday, on Monday Jesus is in the temple and feels anger that moves him to confront and take action against political and religious leaders who use and exploit others for self-gain and their own personal security. We see a Jesus who has need for companionship, caring, and comfort. On Wednesday he graciously receives the gift of expensive perfumed oil poured out upon him in an act of extravagant love and devotion by an unnamed woman. We watch as Jesus experiences betrayal at the hands of one of those closest to him – one of the twelve with whom he shares his last Passover meal. He begs his three closest friends, his inner circle – Peter, James, and John – to keep awake, stay and watch with him while he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane. He is troubled, agitated. He senses what is coming. He does not want to die. He asks God to deliver him from evil, to make it so that he will not have to drink the cup of suffering that is yet to come. And still, he empties himself yet more – *“Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.”* Does God want Jesus to die? No. And yet God’s unfailing, persistent love will not permit the Creator of all, the Holy One to give up on humanity. Love will prevail. And it will be costly.

Love will ultimately win – at a high price. The price will be human betrayal, denial, desertion – failed discipleship. It will include lying, trumped up charges, injustice, and death by crucifixion carried out by the state, aided by some corrupt religious collaborators. Love in all its vulnerable, foolish, crushed glory hanging on a cross - displayed for the public to see, to remind them - this violent brutality is what happens to those who oppose the rulers of this world. Jesus utters a final cry of despair, a cry of abandonment to the Abba he loves. Truth is finally spoken by an outsider – a gentile soldier – *“Truly this man was God’s Son”*. Jesus’ broken body attended to by women who have remained at a distance. Unnamed women who were disciples, too. And a wealthy leader of the council, Joseph of Arimathea, who asks Pilate for Jesus’ body to give him a proper burial.

Suffering love transforms those whose lives it touches. Mysteriously, divinely, resurrection and new life come through suffering love. It is a hard way. So we need to walk together as we journey in the shadow of the cross. It is not easy to look at our own complicity and complacency living in ways that oppose the self-emptying love of our Lord. The cost to God is high, and God has deemed us worth the price. The gift of grace we have received can only be humbly and gratefully accepted to let it do its transforming work in us.

May this be for you a prayerful, Holy week – from Maundy Thursday into Good Friday, through Holy Saturday and arriving at the empty tomb, ready to greet with joy the risen Lord on Easter Day, embracing his Resurrection life, and experiencing again that we are forgiven, loved, and free. Amen.