

Palm Monday

In our first reading this morning, we heard that Jerusalem was in turmoil. Something about Jesus has this effect on Jerusalem. This language echoes Jesus' first arrival when the magi come looking for the newborn king: "When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him."¹ And now as Jesus makes his way into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, the city is once again all riled up, or perhaps it has not stopped being riled up. In fact Jerusalem has been troubled and unsettled for years. A colleague points out:

The Roman occupation of Israel was a brutal fact of everyday life...Farmers, barely able to raise enough to feed their families, paid 25% of their harvest to Rome every two years and 10% of their harvest to the Temple every year. Enormous amounts of resources were taken from the people of Israel to benefit the Roman Empire...

The Israelites were particularly hard for the Romans to pacify. Central to the identity of Jewish people was (and is) the story of the Exodus where God delivered the people from a brutal empire ruled by Pharaoh...By the time of Jesus, people were increasingly expecting liberation from the Roman Empire just as they had been liberated from Egypt.

The annual Passover celebration (the story of Exodus retold) often turned into a time of social unrest and calls for liberation, especially in Jerusalem.

By the time of Jesus, violent riots were such a regular feature of the season of Passover each year that the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate had begun to make it a practice every spring around Passover to leave his headquarters in Caesarea fifty miles away to the west and travel those fifty miles across the countryside and process through the streets of Jerusalem to his palace there.²

So Jerusalem is an unsettled place, and here comes this prophet from Galilee, the Prince of Peace, or the Son of God riding on a donkey depending on whose view you take. Kings were known to ride donkeys during times of peace. Horses were reserved only for war and for processions of might and power. It could be said that a king

¹ Matthew 2: 3, NRSV.

² Dr. Ron Byars quoting the Rev. Ron Luckey, an ELCA pastor

who fears no threat rides a donkey. Jesus knows what kind of king he is and he knows what kind of kingdom he comes to usher in. He comes in peace to usher in peace. He does not however come to make nice. It's an important distinction, especially for one who comes not simply to herald a coming kingdom in some faraway heaven in the distant future. In Jesus, the kingdom of heaven has come near. He has urged his disciples to pray for and work for God's kingdom come *on earth*, not far removed but here where tyrants rule and the least of these are still hungry, imprisoned, and sick. And in Matthew's timeline, he comes on a Monday.

This realization messes with our neat and tidy timelines, of course. Palm Monday doesn't have quite the same ring to it. I think we'd be hard pressed to get enough people to wave palms and sing "All Glory, Laud, and Honor" tomorrow morning because it is a Monday after all, with all that comes with Mondays—jobs, bills, appointments, meetings, reviews, pink slips, and parking tickets. In Matthew's telling it is not just any Monday; it is the Monday ahead of the Passover celebration in Jerusalem. Estimates suggest that the population of Jerusalem at the time was normally around 50,000 people. That number was believed to swell upwards of 125,000 to 150,000 during Passover. One might argue that this made for more of a manic or frantic Monday. More people require more resources. More people means that the streets and the Temple would be more crowded. Tensions are already high. Pilate has likely arrived with his warhorses and soldiers in tow. If riots are commonplace, and if the story of Passover is in the air, one can only imagine what kind of Monday it must be. And then Jesus comes into the mix, the rabbi from Galilee who has just healed two blind men in Jericho. Their cries to him, calling him the Son of David still linger in many of his followers' ears, pointing to him as promised Messiah, the long-awaited king who will reclaim the throne of his ancestor David and save them one and all. Jesus knows that the city is in turmoil, quaking and rumbling the Greek suggests, the same word that gives us the word, seismic. Jesus is not simply coming to enjoy a few moments in the limelight or to pacify the hungry masses. Jesus is coming to confront all that has undermined and corrupted the life and worship of the people, to make right what is wrong, to make whole what is broken, and to break the hold the elite have on all that is good and all that is sacred, to take on the brutality that has become a fact of everyday life.

And so, yes, he carefully scripts the ride in on a humble donkey, once again making the explicit connection to a passage from Zechariah, emphasizing that he is the promised one, the one the prophets hoped

for and longed for, the fulfilment, the in-the-flesh presence of the very God who has pursued and rescued the people for generations. And now, this Jesus has come to Jerusalem to confront and confound all that oppresses the people. And again, he does not come to make nice or to make people be nice.

And in Matthew's account, he heads straight for the Temple where he turns over tables, calls out those who have warped the worship offered there, and then turns to healing the blind and the lame. These are disruptive acts. But they are not simply stunts pulled for shock value alone. They are a judgment on a system that churns along for the benefit of the powerful and at the expense of the least of these. And Jesus will have none of it. And did you notice? The act that draws the ire of the chief priests and scribes is not the turning over of the tables but the acts of healing and the children's crying out, "Hosanna to the Son of David." It's one thing to borrow a donkey and topple a few tables; it is another thing entirely to upend the way they have always done it and to question the very heart of Temple life, to call out the systems that conspire to oppress and demean those who do not sit in power or wear the fancy robes. And now is not the time to make nice or play by the rules. Jesus knows that his time is as limited as the leaders' patience. He will not get out of this confrontation alive, so he uses his moment to give new life to others, the way God always intended for the community of faith to do.

And so I wonder, what would Jesus upend if he marched into the church today? What would he disrupt or rattle to call us on the carpet? What would he say about our Sunday ways and the part they play in the Monday world? As I stand here in my fancy robe with my pretty stole, I realize I am more likely to play the role of the priest than of the children crying out from the shadows. And Monday's coming, not just for me but for everyone, with its struggles and injustices getting in the way of Jesus' kingdom come and coming on earth. We give what we can to One Great Hour of Sharing. We bring toilet paper and socks and canned goods. We count out our coins and roll up our sleeves to help where we can, but I wonder if that is all the church can do. Yes, we feed the hungry and tend the sick, but I can't help but wonder if Jesus wants us not simply to patch up those harmed by the system but to question and transform the system itself.

My friend and colleague Pen Peery writes:

On a bench outside St. Alban's Episcopal Church in the quiet and quaint (and affluent) town of Davidson, NC a man lies draped in a blanket. His face is covered. He could be any one of the millions of the homeless poor who take sleep when they can get it, except for the fact that upon closer inspection this man's feet are pierced, evidence of the fact that he has been crucified.

The parish installed the provocative statue called *Jesus the Homeless* [in the spring of 2014]. It is the first of three of its kind to be [installed] in the United States. Soon after the statue made its debut a woman from the neighborhood called the police to report suspicious activity. Another neighbor filed a complaint and wrote a letter to the editor of the local paper because the statue 'creeped him out.'³

[Pen says,] Sometimes I worry that the Jesus I proclaim doesn't creep people out enough.

If there were really two parades that entered Jerusalem at Passover that year, sometimes I wonder if I am spending my energy on making sure the one with horses has everything they need to be comfortable instead of laying my cloak out for the man coming down the hill from the Mount of Olives.⁴

I often share Pen's worry. So often we encourage those crying out for justice and healing to wait their turn, to follow protocol, to work through the system. But Jesus has no patience for the system, not when it only benefits the ones who have shaped it in the first place, the ones who hold all the cards and call all the shots. Jesus is the Prince of Peace, not the Prince of Nice. He disrupts and confronts and upends everything. He heals those who aren't even supposed to be in the Temple, the ones who quite possibly creep everyone out, the broken, the battered, the lost and the left out. He has no time for my decent and orderly ways, not at the expense of those who are crying out for justice and mercy. And as uncomfortable as that may make me, it is good news. Because in the end, it is not my robe or my degrees or my making nice and following the rules that saves me. It is this Jesus, the one who breaks into my pretty Sunday ways to turn my Monday world upside down who saves me. This one who is betrayed and handed over on a Thursday, crucified on a Friday, is ultimately raised on Sunday to save us all. And the everyday world is never the same, or at least it shouldn't be.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³ <http://www.npr.org/2014/04/13/302019921/statue-of-a-homeless-jesus-startles-a-wealthy-community>

⁴ Pen Peery from his paper for the Well, 2014.