

Isaiah 50:4-9a, Psalm 118 (sung—Palm Sunday selection)
Mark 11:1-11

word count:1,413

The time was 30 AD at the beginning of the week of Passover. Riding into Jerusalem from the west was the entourage of the all-powerful governor of Judea, Idumea and Samaria. They came in columns of imperial cavalry and soldiers, accompanied by the sound of trumpets and the purple color of royalty. Carried high upon his bier was Pontius Pilate. The pomp of this procession indicated that the representation of power upon this earth, that of Rome and the son of a god called, “emperor” was claiming royal privilege by coming into Jerusalem in time for Passover. Roman power and Roman theology made their appearance together known.

During Passover Jews reminded each other of a time when they had been liberated, and Pilate’s presence at this holy time, in such a show of power in his re-entry into Jerusalem, was in turn a reminder to the Jews of, “That was then—this is now.” They were no more than a vassal state of Rome. At Passover, the city swelled with pilgrims and each year, this royal Roman procession wound its way into the city to stifle any thoughts of rebellion.

At the same time Pilate rode in from the west, another procession was beginning in the east. Jesus sent his disciples on ahead to look for a donkey, and thereby makes an obvious and dangerous connection to a scripture from *Zechariah 9:9* “Rejoice, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey—riding on a donkey’s colt.”

The symbol of Roman power and theology rides in majesty from the west. From the east, Jesus takes on the mantle of representing a kingdom of God that is greater than any political power. He knows what he is implying by wearing these words of *Zechariah*, and he actually rides in from the opposite direction on a colt. Not only does he mirror the actions of royalty going on across the city, he rides into town to the waving of palm branches, which is a symbol of Israel’s independence movement. This is obviously Messianic and a direct challenge to Rome.

At this time, the Emperor was calling himself the ‘Son of God.’ Therefore, to affirm that Jesus was the son of God was to say the emperor is not! It is very similar to the earliest Christian creed, ‘Jesus is Lord.’ If Jesus is Lord, and not Caesar, If Jesus is the son of God, and not Caesar, then it is not just a theological statement, but also a political one, and a very daring, dangerous, and subversive one at that!

“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” This is from the *118th Psalm*—a psalm to be sung at the enthronement of a Jewish king! This was so perilous a political move that the temple priests needed to go and meet Jesus in order to get him to quiet the crowds. They had to tell him that he was stirring up the crowds at just the wrong moment, creating a short fuse to the eruption of a tenuous time bomb between Rome and Jerusalem. Despite their differences, they do not want things to end this way. Why is Jesus so defiant? Why can’t he at least try to get along?

However, this is clearly the point: Jesus is not interested in getting along. He is not interested in alliances. He is not interested in half-truths, in half-hearted religion, in power politics. He has come to proclaim truth. Moreover, it is because of the truth that he will be crucified. This is a moment of confrontation, with all who think that they hold the reigns of power in this world.

These Roman forces came together against him because he dared to speak the truth that no government, power structure or domination system exists that is above the Creative force, of which Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “The arc the universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

Any structure that exists the purpose of which is to enrich the few and impoverish the many, will be swept away by the victory of God-in-love. Any ideology or religious institution that seeks to exclude, marginalize, or ally itself with a domination system will eventually perish in the face of love and truth. Here we see it happening in Jesus’ own time. Rome will see itself conquered by others, and a follower of “The Way” of Jesus will lead Rome a few centuries hence.

Pastor Gary Roth said, “In a generation, people will be marveling at the followers of Christ. ‘See how they love each other!’ One ancient commentator will be saying of them, ‘They have turned the world upside down!’”¹

It will be this movement of powerlessness, of the way of the servant-leader, of the way of love, which will ultimately conquer the world.

The *118th Psalm* says, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.”

Where are those rejected stones today—where have they become cornerstones? Jesus burned his bridges behind him. Think of the folks who burned theirs behind them because a great truth was not vested in the status quo and thus not recognized until such time that people showed the courage to listen to the truth where it really rested; not necessarily in a tenuous agreement called the laws of society, but perhaps *because or in spite of* society.

In our own time, we have seen people take the ride into Jerusalem. How seriously do you take the ride across the palms in your own faith journey? Do you follow it despite the consequences, or do you choose the safer route? Perhaps we find ourselves on the other side, entreating the rider on the colt to stop and reconsider, to fit in, to stop upsetting everything. Maybe we even play it so safe that we feel threatened and become angry with the person whose journey of truth rocks the small worlds that we create for ourselves. I think of a news clip showing angry demonstrators standing with Governor George Wallace near the doors of a school that was about to be integrated. I remember the hate and fear on those faces. Bridges had been burned. There would be no help and no comfort from them. Yet the rejected stone from the builders of one society would someday be the cornerstone of another.

I think of all those who stand for the principles of equality, peace and justice, and how they burned bridges at great personal loss. Of Jesus it was once said, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” This weekend, with great regard and no offense, I am rephrasing this as, “Can anything good come out of Iowa?” Love will eventually win in the end, won’t it?

Where will the journey take us beginning in this Holy Week? Jesus took it as far as he could, across the palm branches and through the temple, and to his death. What truth compels us as it did him; to burn the kinds of bridges that separate in order to lay the foundation for the pathways that link us together on our way? Don’t take the trip if it is not worth taking. If we are going to take the journey of life, then take it all the way to Jerusalem and let the chips fall where they may. All or nothing. Bill Coffin used to say, “There are more important tragedies than the tragedy of death. There are no more important victories than the victory of love.”²

Whether to government, religious institution, or even to those who would otherwise support us; we, like Jesus, need to come into Jerusalem having said and done not the things that conform us to the world, but rather the things that transform us and consequently transform our

world through the radical message of God's all-inclusive love shown to us in the gospel accounts of Jesus.

Follow Him. Ride into Jerusalem in full view. Carry the truth with you at all cost. In the end, the bridges will all be behind you no matter what. Take the journey right up to the gates of the temple and into the most difficult places in which you find yourselves, with the gift of God's peace and love.

This is an open table....wherever you are on that journey, you are welcome here.

Sermon Resources

1. Gary Roth, in his sermon, "In God's Name"
2. William Sloane Coffin

Scripture for Palm Sunday, April 5, 2009

Isaiah 50:4-9a

4 The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens— wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. 5 The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. 6 I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. 7 The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; 8 he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. 9 It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

Mark 11:1-11

1 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples 2 and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. 3 If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately." 4 They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, 5 some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" 6 They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. 7 Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. 8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. 9 Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! 10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" 11 Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.