

Armed with Palm Branches

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on March 24, 2024

Friendship Presbyterian Church

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So, they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!" Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

(John 12:12-16, NRSV)

Recently, a writer for the magazine *The Christian Century* wrote of three strangers she had knocking at her front door a few weeks ago on a wet Saturday morning. When she opened the door, she saw a middle-aged husband and wife and a teenage girl, their daughter, who looked as if she didn't want to be there. The husband and wife introduced themselves as members of a nearby Baptist church and said that they wanted to talk with her about Jesus.

"Do you know Jesus?" they asked.

"Yes," she replied. "We're acquainted."

More questions followed, like –

Do you believe if you died today (God forbid!), that you would go to heaven?

Do you believe there is anything you can do to lose God's love?

And so on, and on, with some front door evangelism. Considering these few minutes spent at the front door on a rainy Saturday morning, she wrote this insightful reflection –

Some of their questions were interesting ones, and, in a different setting, with different people – say, in a bar, with friends – I could imagine them prompting lively, wondering, exploring, even challenging conversation. But I sensed my visitors were looking for particular answers, and that some of my answers would not be the right ones. After answering a few of their questions, I thanked them for stopping by. They immediately got the hint and said goodbye, leaving me with a few pamphlets.

There's not much in our broader culture right now that makes me hopeful about people talking across political and religious differences. Given the way church affiliation maps onto political affiliation in the U.S., I suspect my visitors and I would have political as well as theological differences.

But something about our brief encounter made me feel oddly hopeful as I reflected on it afterward. I felt a tenderness and respect for their commitment and their willingness to risk the vulnerability of knocking on strangers' doors to talk about Jesus. I wondered if I missed an opportunity; if, with a little more courage and patience on my part, we could have had a different kind of conversation.

I think many of us can relate to this experience and perhaps have had similar thoughts. I know I have. And it's reflecting on such things that leads her – and us – to Palm Sunday and to the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem, riding on a donkey ... riding into a confrontation but in a spirit of peace.

And yes, this memorable story is *full* of confrontation and danger, even if for us – in our celebratory mood of waving palm branches – it's a little less than obvious, just as with those excited disciples of old. Jesus is at the height of his popularity and fame. Messianic murmurings are in the air, and the Jewish authorities are getting nervous. And now, after nearly three years in the countryside of Galilee and Judea, Jesus is turning his sights towards Jerusalem.

He had spoken with his disciples earlier about what all this means – that days of confrontation were coming – but they seemed unable to grasp what he meant. For them, and for thousands of peasants longing for freedom, Jesus entering Jerusalem was to be the beginning of greater things. The joyful exhilaration is palpable as the throng draws closer to the city gates, for soon, surely, the revolution would commence, and the Messianic King be enthroned, and for all the peaceful show of a donkey and palm branches, the hated Romans would at last be driven out at the point of a sword.

All the while, the Jewish elites, the Temple authorities, understand too well (and better than Jesus' own disciples) that this is going to end badly – for themselves and everyone else – if all this is allowed to continue.

You see, these elites had an understanding with the Romans: That in return for paying the annual tribute and for keeping the peace, these leaders had the assurance that they would be left alone to lead. The Romans couldn't have cared less what the Jews believed or didn't believe, but they *did* care *very much* about threats of insurrection ... which meant that these *Jewish leaders* cared very much about threats of insurrection, for fear that if things got out of control, then the conclusion would be as grim as it was certain: The Romans would come in and take care of business.

But to fully understand *why* Jesus got up on a donkey on *that* day, in *that* place, to force this confrontation, it helps to remember that there were actually *two* processions into Jerusalem that day. I learned of this several years ago, and it has forever changed how I see this event. The one we already know about came in from the east. But one also came in from the *west*. It was the procession of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, draped in the gaudy glory of imperial power: horses, chariots, swords and spears, gleaming armor, golden eagles mounted on poles.

He moved in with the army at the beginning of Passover week to make sure nothing got out of hand. Insurrection always seemed to be in the air with these people – remember that the Passover festival itself re-lives God’s liberation of his people from an *earlier* empire! – and so Pilate would take no chances. It was a procession meant to *intimidate*, to *overwhelm* ... a little “shock and awe” to proclaim the invincibility of Rome and the lordship of Caesar, the one who had brought “peace” to the earth – at the point of a sword.

From the east came the other procession, a procession of peasants, with Jesus in an ordinary robe riding on a young donkey. The careful preparations for it suggest that what Jesus had planned was a highly symbolic act. Pilate’s procession embodies the power, glory, and violence of the empire which rules the world. Jesus’ procession embodies an alternative vision – that of the Kingdom of *God* ... a vision of justice and equity, of non-violence and healing and peace ... *God’s own dream for this world*.

This is what we have to understand: Jesus’ procession *deliberately* counters what is happening on the other side of the city. He knows exactly what he’s doing. He knows that his entering Jerusalem to the cries of “Hosanna, Loud Hosanna!”, is not a sweet act without consequences. He knows that he is heading into the home territory of the powers of his world – and that he *is* forcing a confrontation.

But all this confrontation *begins* with a *sign of peace*: Jesus rides into town on a borrowed donkey, recalling Zechariah’s promise of the *humble* king, who dismantles the weaponry of war:

*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.
He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem;
and the battle-bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations ...*
(Zechariah 9:9-10, NRSV)

In this simple and counterintuitive act of humility, Jesus is *confronting and disrupting* the old ways of domination and death – but with a *sign of peace*! And in our own contentious times, I wonder how we as followers of this Jesus might be called to step into the public square, into the contentious places, or to sit around dinner tables, or even just to stand in the front door with strangers, with something of Jesus’ Palm Sunday spirit.

Those disciples of old approached this moment as if the donkey is just a ploy ... like Jesus can’t really mean what he’s showing them he means. They couldn’t finally believe that this wasn’t just a front for the insurrection. For them, you *bet* it was a confrontation, and *real* confrontation is about defeating and humiliating the enemy. And if by some wild chance Jesus means something else, they (and we) have real trouble seeing how a sign of true humility, of peace, is anything other than weakness.

As writer and pastor Benjamin Cremer has put it so well,

We want the warhorse. Jesus rides a donkey.

We want the bird of prey. The Holy Spirit descends as a dove.

We want the militia. Jesus calls fishermen, tax collectors, women, and children ...

We want the courtroom. Jesus sets a table.

We want the gavel. Jesus washes feet.

We want to take up swords. Jesus takes up a cross.

We want the nation. Jesus calls the church.

We want the roaring lion. God comes as a slaughtered lamb.

We keep trying to arm God. God keeps trying to disarm us.

That's how Love does it. That's how Jesus does it.

I think back now about that Christian Century author's evangelistic visitors ... I think about the people I have some chance encounters with – or maybe not so much *chance* encounters with. I think about how I might have a different conversation with them—confronting the reality of our differences, not to argue but in a spirit of peace.

But those conversations, by comparison, are the easy ones. There are others that might be had, and they're much harder. The narrative of deep divides and polarization makes a lot of us nervous to even talk with neighbors who are not like us, who don't think like us. How might we confront those differences and disrupt those forces that foment fear and resentment and turn us away from our God-given responsibility to love and care for our neighbors – and do so with a sign of peace, in the spirit of peace, with the skills and will for peace?

This Palm Sunday may we go out, armed with palm branches, and re-engage with our circles, our communities, our world, and wrestle together with these questions and seek new ways to engage these troubled times with Jesus' courageous, confrontive, often disruptive, and yet life-giving spirit of peace – to the glory of God! Amen.