

“Palm Sunday; A Choice of Processions”

First in a Sermon Series *The Final Week*

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Source Material: *The Last Week; What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem*, Marucs J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan.

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Script: Mark 11:1-11

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When our children were in early elementary school we lived in a small town south of Rochester, Minnesota. I had someone in the hospital I needed to visit and so late one afternoon we drove into that city via the highway that passes the airport. On the tarmac in the distance we could see a Boeing 747 with an ornamental symbol on its tail wing. It was clear that it was not a commercial airline. Just as we passed the roadway to the airport we found ourselves right in the middle of a procession of shiny black long limousines, police cars, and sheriff deputies—lights flashing. There must have been eight or nine limousines with smoked-glass windows preventing us from seeing who was in them. It wasn't hard to sense the presence of additional security behind those windows. Serious people with guns. It was a little frightening with all the security around and we didn't know if we were in trouble being in the middle of the whole procession or not. We didn't quite know what to do, so we just kept pace with them in our little chevy Cavalier station-wagon, and enjoyed the benefits of a secure escort through every light in town until we reached Methodist hospital, which was where we were headed and apparently they were too. The next day we heard on the news that King Hussein of Jordan had come for a visit to the Mayo Clinic.

Processions. A procession like this one entered Jerusalem on the first day of the week that Jesus died, a Sunday. It was a large procession, very orderly. There were banners and drums, horses and armor, swords and chariots. Anyone walking along that road was pushed off to the side in dust, awe, fear, or resentment. The person at the center of this procession into Jerusalem came to bring peace. He was a representative of the “Lord”, the “Son of God”, the “Savior”, who brought “peace on earth.” He entered the city and went straight to the Temple but didn't go in. Instead he turned left and entered the Roman Antonia Fortress. It was Pontius Pilate, Governor of Palestine, coming to enforce the Pax Romana— “the peace of Rome” during the Jewish festival of Passover when things usually got out of hand. The “Son of God” of course was the Emperor Tiberius.

Across town another procession took place—a counter-procession. You can't quite call it orderly, but it was certainly planned. The choice of transportation was intentional—no limousine, no chariot, no war horse, rather a colt. As unimpressive as it was unexpected. In place of the security escort and the entourage— followers and unwitting young families who just happened to be going in that direction. A festival spirit took over and they began to sing— perhaps not even knowing why, perhaps prompted by some insiders. Then someone ripped a branch off a near-by tree and laid it on the road, and then another. The palm branch was the national symbol of Israel. It was like waving the American flag to welcome this peasant from up north. It had all the elements and fever of a 1960's political demonstration. It was. It was an intensely political and dangerous maneuver. Any Roman security forces, unfortunate enough to be assigned the east side of the city by the Mount of Olives instead of welcoming in Pilate, were probably humored by its pathetic show of force. If they understood any of its political challenge, they laughed it

off as insignificant. The peasant rode the colt into the city, went straight to the Temple, scouted it out for the next day and immediately left. It was too dangerous to stay within the walls at night.

Two processions took place on that Sunday that's become known as Palm. One uses military and political power and sleeps at night next door to the temple (the religious power). Strange bed-fellows. One offers a different kind of kingdom and different kind of power, and sleeps in a nearby village called Bethany, literally *The House of God*. One is friends with the wealthy & powerful and extorts money from the 90% of the population who are poor and rural. One is a peasant teacher who avoids cities and welcomes the "untouchables" of his society.

These two processions form the dynamic of Jesus' last week. We will examine these differing kingdoms in during lent, one day a week. In the clash of these two processions we know there's going to be winners and losers, death and triumph. Jesus knew it too. He said:

"See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles [i.e, Romans]; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." (Mark 10:32-34)

The Roman soldier stationed at the east gate on that day may have chuckled at the pathetic parade, but the crowd who got swept up into its patriotic fervor and the religious authorities who watched had something nagging in the back of their minds. They immediately went home and did a google search of their Hebrew Bible for key words like *colt*, *Hosanna*, *riding*, and found Zechariah 9.

There, the King would be coming to Jerusalem or Zion, "**humble, and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey.**" Their eyes lit up when they read that. Then the next verse tells what kind of a King this will be:

"He will cut off the chariot from Ephriam and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations." (vs.10)

He will be a king of peace. In contrast to the other procession, which embodies power, glory, violence, Jesus' kingdom is an alternative.

A few years ago Mel Gibson's near X-rated film *The Passion of the Christ* hit the theaters with marketing smarts on Ash Wednesday. When we hear the term "passion" in reference to Jesus, we normally think of his final hours of suffering and death. *Passio* in Latin after all, means suffering.

Yet we forget amid all the gore and blood of that type of passion the first passion of Jesus, and that is the **Kingdom of God** he came to announce. A passion is any consuming interest. A passion is something we are willing to die for, if necessary. Jesus had that kind of passion for God's Kingdom. His first passion led to his second. "Those who live for non-violent justice die all too often from violent injustice."ⁱ

What I've recently come to understand is that Jesus' final week was a struggle, not between his vision of God and "the Jews", the bad-guys, with the Romans off to the side who step in to do their dirty work. It was not a struggle of the spiritual world only— with Christ appeasing some angry God. It was a clash of processions. The few rich and powerful (Roman and Jewish) who ruled with an iron hand the political, military, and economic spheres that oppressed 90% of the peasant population and were legitimated by the temple priests who sanctioned this unjust system in the name of God. Jesus had a different sense of the kind of Kingdom God is seeking to bring about.

But clearly, Jesus' methods in this struggle are unorthodox. Forged in his temptations in the wilderness following his baptism, Jesus wrestled with methods of being a savior: Should he use political power?

Should he use economics and feed everyone bread from stones? Should he use miracles to dazzle and convince? No, his method would not be the human methods of saving. In the end, he chose the path of what Martin Luther called “left-handed power.”

“Left-handed power...is paradoxical power: power that looks for all the world like weakness, intervention that seems indistinguishable from nonintervention. More than that, it is guaranteed to stop no determined evildoers whatsoever. It might, of course, touch and soften their hearts. But then again, it might not. It certainly didn’t for Jesus; and if you decide to use it, you should be quite clear that it probably won’t for you either.

“But when you come to think of it, it *is* power— so much power, in fact, that it is the only thing in the world that evil can’t touch.”ⁱⁱ

Direct, straight-line, right-handed, intervening power is the way of the world, of military force, the way of Rome. With it you can get a lot done; you can build a house, enslave others to till your fields and serve you meals. But right-handed power has a whopping limitation. That is, that in the things that really make life worthwhile, it is utterly worthless. It’s like the mother with tired screaming kids at Disneyland, “Shut up and enjoy yourself!” Try to use direct, right-handed power to make your teenager do much of anything and see where it gets you! Jesus saw that the only way to overcome evil was through a thoroughgoing inner spiritual transformation that refuses to use right-handed power. Our government’s (left-handed) diplomatic efforts to promote peace, cooperation and understanding with other countries cost us \$1.5 billion a year. We spend the same amount every day on right-handed power efforts with our military. Jesus’ methods were unorthodox.

So Jesus rides into Jerusalem, the seat of political, economic and religious power, on a colt, a donkey. Left-handed power. It looks for all the world like weakness and foolishness. It is Rosa Parks on a bus. It is Gandhi organizing a strike. It is Martin Luther King, Jr. pressing forward after his home was bombed. It is that man staring down that red-army tank in Tiananmen Square. It is GRIP working at issues of poverty, education, healthcare & immigration. It is loving your enemies —turning the other cheek, forcing your striker to use his ritually pure hand and thus making him defile himself if he chooses to continue to be violent—it’s carrying the enemies’ pack a mile beyond the required distance.

Paul wrote:

²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength...

²⁷But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1)

In the same spirit Walter Knight wrote a poem:

Peace plans its strategy, and encircles its enemies.
Peace marshals its forces, and storms the gates.
Peace gathers its weapons and pierces the defense.

Peace, like war, is waged.

But Christ has turned it all around:

the weapons of peace are love, joy, goodness, long-suffering;
the arms of peace are justice, truth, patience, prayer;
the strategy of peace brings safety, welfare, happiness;
the forces of peace are the sons and daughters of God.

— Walter Knight

Jesus: “Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the Good News.” To repent in the Greek sense was to **“go beyond the mind you have.”**

Discipleship means: Deny self, take up cross (daily) & follow. Going to Jerusalem, suffering, dying and rising. No guarantees of safety, in fact in the process you may lose yourself (and ultimately find your true self).

What is your Jerusalem? Which procession are you in? Which procession do you want to be in? So be it. Amen.

ⁱ Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, p. VIII.

ⁱⁱ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 20.