



First United Church of Oak Park

March for Our Lives

John 12:12-19

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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. So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. The Pharisees then said to one another, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!”

My youngest sister, Maisey, moved to Los Angeles a few years ago, which is a perfect place for her to call home. She loves the weather, she loves the people, she loves the social scene, she loves everything about it except for the traffic. One day, she was trying to get to work and the street she usually takes was completely blocked off; you couldn’t get anywhere because that day the Gay Pride Parade was headed down that same street that she takes to work. So she tried to find another route, to go around the parade but no luck; every street seemed to be blocked off by the crowds or barricades. She even tried to ask a police officer for directions around the route and his advice to her was just to wait until the parade was over with, which could have been hours.

But she doesn’t give up, and eventually she comes up on this one intersection where there are no barricades or people on her side of the street or on the other side. And it seemed that if she timed it just right, she could get through between parade floats passing by, like crossing a river of rainbow and glitter. So, she goes for it, sailing across the Pride parade and just as soon as she does a parade Marshall shows up in front of her. And he’s directing her to fall in line with the flow of the parade float traffic. She realized pretty quickly that there was no turning back, and not wanting to get into trouble she just kind of played along like she was supposed to be there, hoping to find a way out if she just kept going with the flow. With music bumping, colors of the rainbow everywhere (there was glitter all over her car for months) she said that this was the best commute she’s ever had. The crowds were cheering her

on, thinking she was just part of the celebration. They had no clue that she hadn't planned to be part of the parade that day.

I bet the crowds that were gathered in Jerusalem didn't know they would be part of a parade on that day either. The people have gathered in the city to celebrate the Passover festival and as they are coming into Jerusalem, all of a sudden, they become a part of Jesus' flash-mob parade of sorts. In fact, they were very likely to have been a part of two parades that day. One led by Jesus and one led by Rome - the nation that occupied Jerusalem when all of this is taking place. Even though scripture only tells us of Jesus' parade, we know from historians that during the first century, Rome always held an imperial parade in Jerusalem during major Jewish festivals. The message of Passover posed somewhat of a threat to the Roman empire, celebrating the freedom from the oppressive Egyptian rule so very long ago. Rome didn't want the people to get any bright ideas.

The crowds headed to the festival would have been thick and numerous that day, with people coming in from outside of Jerusalem, packing in the city walls. The number one goal of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, would have been to keep the peace and the status quo among those gathering crowds. So, on Passover, he would ride his war horse from the west and into the main gate of the city, leading his imperial troops in a parade of military force. The people gathered to the side of the road would inevitably have seen the symbols of Roman values on display: weapons and war armor, national symbols mounted on poles and banners, the emblems of allegiance to the Emperor, whom they called the Son of God. And even if the crowds weren't on the parade route, I imagine you could have felt the ground shake at the marching of soldiers, you would have heard the cracking of leather, the clinking of bridles, and the beating of drums, you would have tasted the blood of an oppressive regime in the air.¹ There is no doubt that both the sights and the sounds of Pilate's imperial parade were meant to serve as reminders of just who or what had control over their lives and even their deaths.

While all four the gospels tell this story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem, John's version is particularly political and the contrast striking. Pilate comes in from the west gate on a war horse, Jesus rides in from the East on a working-class animal; the crowd gathered at the main gate would have cheered aloud the name of the Emperor. Jesus would have been cheered on by those oppressed by that very empire, cheered on with shouts of "Hosanna! Hosanna!" which literally means "Save Us! Save Us!" Pilate marched to dominate and control lives, Jesus marched to disrupt that domination and resist that way of control. While Pilate's march seemed much like a military parade, everything about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem that day, everything about Palm Sunday was about protest.

And so, this is how we marched into worship this morning, this is how we begin the journey of Holy Week. This is the way we travel to the foot of the cross and come to experience the empty tomb; not in parade but in protest. In protest against the instruments of terror that still kill the innocent. In the first century a cross, in 2018 an AR-15 rifle. In protest against the regimes of power and domination that barricade the ways of peace and justice because Jesus' way doesn't make a profit or get politicians elected. In protest against keeping the status quo in power even though it is at the expense of what is most sacred in our schools, in our churches, in our communities. Whether we expected to be in a protest this morning or not, that is what Jesus invites our life of discipleship to become, a life of resistance.

¹ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, pp. 2-3

But Jesus does something more here in Jerusalem than provoking the Roman empire. He isn't just some rebellious leader sticking it to the man. This protest is about more than resisting, it is about giving a vision of the new hope to come. It is about a new kingdom at work. It is about fulfilling a promise the people of God have been waiting to become a reality.

This was Jesus' chosen moment to fulfill that promise and to provide that vision of hope. In verse 15 of this passage from John, Jesus finds a young donkey and rides it into Jerusalem, which would have been a sign to the people of a prophecy from Zechariah 9 about a liberator king to come, one that looks very different than other Kings:

“Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.
Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey's colt!”

This role of the king that Jesus takes rules not by power but by peace. Though the powers of Rome had hoped to tempt Jesus to fight fire with fire and might against might, Jesus isn't interested in using violence as a means for liberation. Jesus is not interested in the political power and clout and privileges that come with being on a throne. Jesus isn't entering Jerusalem to replace one tyrant king with another. He's about bringing in a new kind of kingdom of justice and mercy and love and peace. With this kind of king, the “daughter of Zion” has no need to fear.

The term “daughter of Zion,” is used extensively in the Hebrew scriptures, as in this prophecy from Zechariah that is quoted by John. But it is also used in the book Lamentations, a book of psalms and poetry written in the face of overwhelming oppression and loss. The daughter of Zion is the city of Jerusalem personified as a grieving mother who literally weeps for her children lost to violence, starvation and oppression. The daughter of Zion longs for peace in her city. She expresses the pain of the entire community. She is a mother who has buried her children, killed at the hand of violence. Friends, how many daughters of Zion are still weeping for their children? How many children of God long for peace in their city? How many parents have buried their kids at the hands of violence? The answer is... too many.

Yet this promise of Palm Sunday reminds us that God has heard their cries and has known their pain and has felt their longing for change. This king riding on a colt is not a tyrant who will silence their grief, or disregard their demands, or ignore their shouts of “Hosanna! Save Us!” What God will do is participate in the change that is necessary, by way of Jesus. Jesus, who not only stands in resistance to the powers of violence but calls out to its weeping victims: Do not be afraid daughter of Zion, your king is coming. A new hope is arriving. A new kingdom is breaking free. Join in the procession.

Yesterday, 30 of us from First United joined in the procession along with 85,000 other people at the March for Our Lives rally on the west side of Chicago. The Chicago march was just one of many cities that brought out hundreds of thousands of people across the country to demand action against gun violence. An issue that the youth in the city of Chicago have known all too well. This rally and March was completely youth led and it was so clear from the stories and experiences that they shared so publicly that in many ways the empire of violence still rules on. That guns have control over us.

One by one, students approached the mic and shared their life stories of being exposed to and becoming victims of traumatic violence; and they did so through poetry and impassioned speeches

and music. They shared the names of friends and family members who have been killed by guns, whom they spoke aloud with chants of “never again” and “enough.” And they also shared with the crowd that their strong voices demanding action and change are not new – as many black and brown voices have been unheard and even silenced – we just happen to now be listening.

And so, with our ears open, and the mic handed to them, they also invited us to a vision of hope. They came with demands of action and change; they came with an anger and resolve that life should have been different for them, and they were here to take it back. Each of them shared a vision of what their communities should look like without violence: with safe schools and streets, resources and opportunities. They made demands of our lawmakers to work for more resources in their city rather than working for more campaign contributions by the NRA. They called each of us to take action now rather than waiting for the next shooting to rile us from our apathy. They promised that this March would not be the last that we would see of them, but that change was coming.

Friends, a new hope is arriving, a new kingdom is breaking free, the Good News is on its way. We are in a Palm Sunday moment, where it feels as if the values of the empire are gaining on us, where death and suffering seem to have the final word. But Jesus calls us to join in the resistance, to live out our faith as a journey towards justice and peace, to march into the darkness of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday insisting this is not the end of the story.

The call of our faith to resist is resounding, the protest is waiting for our participation, the procession to the resurrection has begun. Palm Sunday reminds us that a protest changed the whole world. That speaking up for what is true and right, even in the face of overwhelming power, has far greater impact than we could ever imagine. As we enter into Holy Week we are invited to decide whether or not we will pick up our palms and protest signs, whether we will join in this protest for peace that is our faith, and whether we will proclaim that change is gonna come, a change that might look something like the resurrection. Amen.