

Palm Sunday April 9, 2017 Zechariah 9:9-10; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 11:1-11

A Subversive Palm Sunday

Watch clip from *Star Wars: The Return of the Jedi*

I wanted to start off today with a little bit of levity because I think we have to find ways to laugh – or at least smile – in the midst of all the terrible things going on around us. If we are not to sink into despair or apathy, we have got to find ways to care for our souls –and humor is one way. After a long, hard day, I’m a big fan of kitten and puppy videos.

But the scene with the Ewoks bowing down to C3P0 because they thought he was a god actually does fit in with Palm Sunday. Their chant (I consulted an Ewok dictionary, but couldn’t find a translation) might be compared to that of the crowd greeting Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem. We do know what that chant was: “Hosanna!”

But despite the fact that we sing “Hosanna” each and every Sunday, I wonder if we really know what we’re saying. We usually think of it as a word of praise, almost synonymous with “Alleluia” (except we can say it in Lent). But “hosanna” literally means “save us.” It’s a prayer, that in the context of Palm Sunday is a plea that came from people looking for deliverance from the boot heel of Rome, a plea to the messiah, God’s anointed one.

Our word of resistance today is “revelation,” the making known of something previously unknown. The Ewoks thought that a god had been revealed to them. And in a way, so did the people waving their palm branches at Jesus. A messiah who would be like the great King David, who would defeat their enemy and make their nation great again. “Save us!” they cried. “Hosanna! Blest is the one who comes in the name of God! Hosanna in the highest!” “Good God, come and save us!”

I don’t know about you, but lately I’ve been inclined to cry out this same prayer myself. As much as I try to limit my intake of the unending bad news from around the world and from our own government, still the infuriating, depressing, demoralizing news seeps in and settles into my body and soul. I would love someone to come and fix it all. I would love for God to appear and make it all better. Hosanna! Come and save us now!

Of course, we don't live in the same kind of empire that existed in Jesus' time. But we do live under a domination system every bit as dedicated to wielding power and control. And Palm Sunday speaks as powerfully to us today as it did then by showing us a different approach, an alternative messiah, a way of resistance to the forces of any empire.

This way of looking at Palm Sunday is different from the way we used to. Ever since the publication of scholarship, like *The Last Week* by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, we've understood the brilliance of the parade into Jerusalem. Jesus was, of course, quite a bit more aware of what he was doing than C3P0. His entry on the back of a donkey was a well-planned and well-staged piece of guerilla theater - in contrast to the show of military might parading into the other side of the city. Pilate with his chariot, warhorses, soldiers and weapons vs. Jesus on a donkey.

You may not be familiar with another comparison between Jesus and Rome. Whenever the Roman empire won a battle or conquered a new people, the emperor didn't immediately send out a Tweet. Instead, messengers would run through the city crying, "Euangelion! Euangelion!" You might recognize that Greek word as it became known in Christianity as "evangelism," but it means "good news" or "gospel." So, for instance, Mark's gospel takes the Roman message of euangelion and turns it into a story about a different ruler. Mark 1:1 states, "The beginning of the euangelion (gospel) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." In this story, the good news is about Jesus, not Caesar, who was referred to on coins and statues as Son of God.

Do you get how subversive the story of Jesus is? In the Palm Sunday parade, he's revealed as messiah, God's anointed – but not from a God who will come down from some heaven far away and rescue the people from their oppressors. Instead Jesus offered a way of godly resistance. A way of peace, a way of spiritual connection to the Divine within and around us, a way that involves self-emptying and setting aside of ego, and willingness to be "all in" for the cause of righteousness, justice, and liberation.

This way of looking at Palm Sunday – and at Christianity in general – might be a revelation for many who have been brought up to believe in the God who will “save” us. That is, a strictly personal savior whose purpose in life was to die in order to take away our well-deserved punishment for all our various sins. Because Christianity became disconnected from its Jewish roots and from its context in the Roman empire, we inherited a tradition that elevated the divinity of Jesus to the extent that his humanity was almost forgotten. The God we thought was revealed in Jesus was the one who would take away the sin that had come into the world through Adam and Eve.

Today, we’re experiencing a reformation in which the teachings of Jesus are being brought back into the light. This Jesus is the one who shows us how to be subversive, how to resist the forces of empire, how to work for causes of righteousness, justice, and liberation. Not that everyone agrees with this Jesus. Pastors are being criticized for “bringing politics into the pulpit.” Good Christians brought up in American Christianity want their clergy to stick to matters of personal salvation. But, as Mahatma Gandhi said, “Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is.”

To be fair, there are also some on the historical Jesus side of things who are skeptical – if not downright dismissive – of any talk of spirituality or mysticism. This is equally wrong. We may not think of God as the “old man in the sky making decisions of life for this one and death for that one or keeping track of sins in a little black book (as my mother used to warn me). However, there is a Divine Presence that exists throughout the universe, that Jesus embodied, that we embody also to the extent we allow it to.

That Presence was with and in Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem to make his statement of resistance against the empire. That Presence is with and in us as well, as we make our stand against the domination system of our day.

Palm Sunday is a political statement. And it's a spiritual statement. Our resistance is rooted in our spiritual tradition, in our sacred scriptures. And in the witness of martyrs throughout the ages – like Kaj Munk, a playwright and Lutheran pastor, arrested by the Gestapo on the night of January 4, 1944, a month after he had defied a Nazi ban and preached at the national cathedral in Copenhagen. His body was found in a roadside ditch the next morning. Like Martin Luther King, Jr. Like Jean Donovan, Ita Ford, Maura Clarke and Dorothy Kazel, the missionaries murdered in El Salvador in 1980.

Like Sr. Dorothy Stang, sometimes called the Martyr of the Amazon. Sr. Dorothy spent nearly 40 years in Brazil as an advocate for indigenous people and the rainforest. Marlene DeNardo, part of that mission (and my spiritual director), described their venture as a complete self-emptying process – following the example of Jesus in the Philippians hymn.

Sr. Dorothy received hate mail and death threats for years. The mayor of the nearby town said, "We have to get rid of that woman if we are going to have peace." The community center for women she founded was riddled with bullets. Once, the police arrested her for passing out "subversive" material. It was the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Finally, angered by her involvement in helping the poor gain legal access to land, wealthy loggers and ranchers engineered her assassination. But she was undeterred. "I know that they want to kill me," she said, "but I will not go away. My place is here alongside these people who are constantly humiliated by the powerful." Visiting her family and community in Ohio a few months before she was killed, she told one sister, "I just want to sink myself into God."

On Feb. 12, 2005, as Sr. Dorothy walked along a dirt road deep in the heart of Brazil's rainforest, two hired assassins blocked her way. They asked her, "Do you have a weapon?" "Yes," she answered, showing them the Bible she carried for decades. She opened it and began to read aloud: "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice. Blessed are the peacemakers ..." Then, she said, "God bless you, my sons." At which point the two shot her six times and ran.

It could have ended there, but it didn't. At her funeral two thousand people gathered and heard her community proclaim, "Today, we are not going to bury Dorothy. We are going to plant her." The crowd responded with "Dorothy vive!" Dorothy lives!

Spiritual leader and peace activist, Father John Dear, who many say is the spiritual heir to the Berrigan brothers, said this about her: "Dorothy is rising in her people and in the land. She will rise in us, too, if we join her campaign. I urge you: Let Dorothy inspire you - her great spirit, her work for justice and peace, her service to the poorest, her defense of the earth. Especially her trust in God, her steadfast determination, her carrying on - no matter what. She will teach us how to do likewise, how to live in hope despite these despairing, deadly times." That sounds like resurrection to me.

I hope none of us will be called upon to make that ultimate sacrifice. But I believe that we are called upon to make *a* sacrifice – to practice the spiritual discipline of self-emptying, letting go of ego, doing what we can, and accepting the consequences. I saw a picture on Facebook yesterday of Fr. Daniel Berrigan in handcuffs with his quote, "If you're going to follow Jesus, you better look good on wood."

God is not coming to save us. That's some very bad news for some. However God is here, and is always ready to empower us to be saviors. That's the very good news of Palm Sunday. Even with the cross looming ahead.

Amen

FIRST READING—ZECHARIAH 9:9-10

There is cause for rejoicing in Jerusalem. Triumphant and celebrating victory, a new ruler enters the city. There's something unusual about this ruler, who does not come mounted on a white charger, riding high and looking out over the people. This ruler comes "humble and riding on a donkey." But make no mistake about it, though a ruler of a different sort, this is the one who will initiate a disarmament program; bring peace for all nations, freedom for prisoners, and goodness and beauty for all.

It is written . . .

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Look! Your ruler comes to you;
triumphant and victorious,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
This ruler will cut off the chariots from Ephraim
and the warhorses from Jerusalem;
and the battle-bow shall be banished.
This ruler shall command peace to the nations;
stretching from sea to sea,
from the River to the ends of the earth.

SECOND READING—PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11

We can have the mind of Christ, but the Christ we celebrate is different from the rulers of the earth. Christ is no ruthless and domineering Caesar but a loving companion. Christ does not bully, tweet, name call, or bloviate. Christ rules from among us, embracing our mortality, feeling our pain, and rejoicing in our success. Power is not unilateral, whether divine or human, but relational. Christ saves us through solidarity not sovereignty.

It is written . . .

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus:
Christ, though in the image of God,
did not deem equality with God
something to be clung to—
but instead became completely empty
and took on the image of oppressed humankind:
born into the human condition,

found in the likeness of human being.

Jesus was thus humbled—
obediently accepting death—even death on a cross!

Because of this God highly exalted Christ
and gave to Jesus the name above every other name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee must bend
in the heavens, on the earth and under the earth,
and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God:
Jesus Christ reigns supreme!

GOSPEL—MARK 11:1-11

The reading reflects the triumph of another kind of power. No Roman legion, but a humble teacher on a donkey, symbol of peace and reconciliation. Caught up in the moment, the crowd can't fully understand this countercultural spectacle. They witness an understanding of a God who has no enemies, makes no threats, destroys no cities, and damns no unbelievers. Such an amazing approach to life – and God – is too much for them to imagine. Indeed, it's impossible, and sadly many who witness Jesus' entry into Jerusalem turn from adulation to abandonment, letting fear rather than love rule their hearts.

It is written . . .

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent off two disciples with the instructions, “Go to the village ahead of you, and as soon as you enter it you will find tethered there a colt on which no one has ridden. Untie it and bring it back. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing that?’ say ‘The Rabbi needs it, but will send it back very soon.’”

So they went off, and finding a colt tethered out on the street near a gate, they untied it. Some of the bystanders said to them, "What do you mean by untying that colt?" They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them take it.

They brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks across its back, and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. And everyone around Jesus, in front or in back of him cried out,

"Hosanna!

Blessed is the One who comes in the name of our God!

Blessed is the coming reign of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest!"

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the Temple. He inspected everything there, but since it was already late in the afternoon, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

OFFERING

We could triumphantly claim that you came just for us, Holy One, but your gifts are poured out for all the broken, all the wandering, all the struggling. So, may we be just like you, pouring out our lives and our treasures, so all might be blessed through you, we pray.

Amen