

Palm (Coat) Sunday
March 28, 2010
Luke 19:41-48
Phil:2:5-11

The Power that Makes for Peace

Today is Palm Sunday of course. It's a bit hard to miss that point with all of the extra greenery in church this morning and the marching around we did at the beginning of the service. We didn't do too bad, at least for Lutherans -who don't have a real reputation for waving our arms- especially while holding funny looking leaves or singing "Hosanna" at the top of our lungs.

Palm Sunday is a very old celebration in the church, dating back to the very earliest centuries of the faith. It marks a dramatic shift in the Lenten journey as we begin the Holiest of Weeks, the sacred days leading up to the death and resurrection of Jesus. The great three days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter are the center around which everything else in the Christian faith revolves. There is an unfortunate trend in many churches to forget a couple of these days. In our busy world, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday easily pass as ordinary weekdays, filled with work and stress like any other, and many people simply move from Palm Sunday directly to Easter.

That is not just unfortunate, it also risks missing the true power of God's love shown in Jesus' death on the cross. To counter this reality, churches enlist the aid of Wal-Mart. Now I'm not talking about putting greeters by the door, we've been doing that long before Sam Walton. I'm talking about the trend to morph Palm Sunday into *Passion Sunday* in an effort to make one stop religious shopping available for busy moderns. In many churches, Palm Sunday begins happy and joyful with palms swaying and singing but the mood quickly changes as we read the account of Jesus suffering and death. A lot of very fine sermons are preached on how quickly the crowd turns from shouts of "Hosanna" to shouts of "crucify him". That's a very legitimate way to go, but you just won't hear one of those sermons today!

Today I want to stay more in the moment of Jesus coming into Jerusalem and consider this text that we usually don't hear in the cycle of the lectionary. It is one that has much to teach us in a world that still fails to recognize "the things that make for peace" – a world that continues to "crush" people and their children "into the ground" because we cannot recognize the Holy Presence of God among us. At the heart of the matter, I believe, is a deadly confusion about what kind of *power* makes for peace.

There are many biblical scholars who believe the crowds who first witnessed Jesus' entry into the capital city of Jerusalem, as a *king* riding on a colt, would have contrasted it the usual entry of political leaders into Jerusalem.¹ Pontius Pilate, the ruling Roman official of the territory, usually made his presence known in Jerusalem during the feast of the Passover in an effort to keep the peace. Instead of a colt, he rode in on a war-horse with soldiers and weapons and all the intimidating power of a dominating empire. It is quite possible that while Jesus was coming in at one end of town, Pilate was making a grand show of his power at the other.

But that kind of power did not make for peace. The readers of Luke know all too well that Jesus is speaking about a fate for the city they have already witnessed. In 66 AD, a Jewish revolt against Rome begins and ends a few years later with a prolonged siege of Jerusalem and the eventual burning and destruction of the temple. The historian Josephus describes a truly horrific scene within the city, as starvation killed thousands of people, and when the final body count is taken, Josephus concludes more than 1 million lose their lives. It seems clear that despite some short-term successes throughout history, the power that makes for peace is not found in the might of an army. Even Rome eventually dies by the sword, as does **everyone** who attempts to live by the sword.

Jesus laments the quest for violence as a seemingly unavoidable consequence of this broken world. Yet in only a few short days, he will also suffer under the unavoidable

¹ <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/march-28-2010.html>

urge for humanity to solve even religious problems with violence. Jesus wastes no time in moving from his inaugural parade to the temple, which is at the very heart of religious power in Jerusalem. There he upsets the status quo and drives out those who are turning religious rites and rituals into get-rich-quick schemes. The temple slaughters thousands of animals each day. Supplying those animals and exchanging Roman coins for Jewish coins (coins without a graven image of the Emperor on them) was big business. It created powerful religious leaders who benefited from all those transactions and who did not want their economic or religious power threatened by some religious purist. But this is not the power that makes for peace either. God surely knows and history clearly shows that peace does not long endure when religious or economic power is left in the hands of only a few.

So what kind of power is left to make for peace? How does Jesus spend his stash of political capital given to him by the adoring crowds? Well that is the story of this week. The proclaimed "king" does not move into the halls of political or religious power. He does not amass a fortune to control the economy. He does something very unexpected... perhaps even ridiculous. He empties himself. His power is that of faith; of knowing that not even death has the power to stop love. The true power of peace is a willingness to humble yourself so that someone else can save face. The ultimate power in the universe is not death or any power that leads to it, but the power of resurrection from the dead because that takes the full power of death head on and swallows it up so that we do not have to be afraid any longer.

This is the peace that passes all understanding. This is the peace we have from God because of what Jesus has done for us, what we will remember in the coming days this week. God has made peace with us. God remembers our sin no more. God cares deeply and compassionately about each and every one of us. Tony Campolo thinks of this kind of love as a grandmother who carries around pictures of every precious grandchild and finds a way to work them into every conversation. "Oh and here's my little _____! Isn't she/he just adorable? That kind of love changes people. It gives us a future when none seems possible. It gives us an identity when pain and abuse have

stripped away the goodness God created us to have. It gives us the courage and the strength to confront the powers in our world today that do NOT make for peace.

But this is not easy. Humbling yourself - giving the other person the benefit of the doubt - living without fear of some "other" - is certainly not the common mode of operation for us. Just look at the national debate on healthcare, the church's debate on human sexuality, or any number of local debates about various issues. Our society is fractured and splintered – politically, economically, and racially. Each "side" does everything it can to discredit their opponent and in this way we continue seeking ways to "crush one another into the ground". Political pundits and talk show hosts do this for a living and we eat it up. But the consequences of treating one another in this way has no power to make for peace. **We cannot recognize the presence of God among us when we think the devil is behind everyone else!** Jesus went to the cross, trusting in God's power to bring life out of death. We, who live by the power of the Holy Spirit, share in that same kind of creative power. Let us move into the coming days trusting not in our own power, but in the power of love and forgiveness. Let that power transform our relationships and our conversations. Let us go to the foot of the cross where all of the violence and all of the powers of death are taken up into the very being of God and transformed into new and unimagined life. Those are the things that make for peace. That is the power to heal our broken world. Amen.