

## **SERMON FOR APRIL 9, 2017**

**Picture this: the ancient city of Jerusalem, built of stone and surrounded by thick stone walls. To access the city, there were several gates, some architecturally gorgeous, and others more utilitarian openings in the massive wall.**

**One of the more impressive gates was the Damascus Gate, located on the north side of the city. This was the gate the Romans used when they entered Jerusalem with their rulers, their generals, and their legions of soldiers. The Damascus Gate was built on a brick road and the Romans and their horses and chariots could navigate this road more easily than the sandy dirt roads that led to other gates.**

**Mostly the Romans stayed out of Jerusalem. They camped on the Mediterranean coast where it was cooler, and built their palaces there. But when the decision was made to enter Jerusalem, the armies and the rulers came to the Damascus Gate. Recent studies of these times have turned up some interesting facts about the troop movement in Jesus' day. Does it surprise us that the Romans demanded that the locals gather at the Damascus Gate to welcome the troops with flowers, palm branches, and shouts of adulation?**

**So, on that first Palm Sunday, there were Roman armies entering Jerusalem to police the Passover celebrations and to make sure that the religious celebration did not become a riot. And the local population and those**

in the city for Passover would have been their welcomers at the Damascus Gate, waving palms and praising the emperor, Caesar Augustus.

While this was happening at a northern gate, another parade was happening at the Beautiful Gate, a much smaller one that was built in one of the inner city temple walls. This was a gate to the holiest of places for the Jewish people of Jerusalem and of the Diaspora. It was the gate that the Jews believed was opened each week at Sabbath time for the Spirit to enter the temple.

At the Beautiful Gate, Jesus entered the Temple Mount, not riding a chariot, but a donkey. He was accompanied not by legions of soldiers, but by his disciples and friends on foot. As at the Damascus Gate, people gathered and waved palm branches. They too cried out praise and blessing, "Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in God's name!"

And the contrast is stark and absolutely clear. There is the Emperor and his officials. And there is Jesus. There are legions of soldiers, and there is a handful of disciples. There is war power and there is peace. There is violence and there is love. Which gate are you at? Whose praises are you singing? What are you willing to trust-the power of a successful war machine or the power of inclusive, healing love?

This Palm Sunday, I was challenged to put those questions to myself. I was challenged by one of my favourite weekly blogs to consider a personal Palm Sunday. It would have been easy for me, this year, to leave myself out of the

**Palm Sunday equation and focus on Donald Trump's choice of the Roman way of violence.**

**Fifty cruise missiles were fired from the same Mediterranean coast favoured by the Roman captors of Israel. The irony should not escape us. And those missiles were retaliation for Bashar Al Assad's chemical weapon strike on his own people. Violence begets violence, and now we have the two nations with the largest nuclear capability, Russia and the USR, in a war of accusations with one another. Add the terrorist attack in Sweden to the Syrian fiasco, and we should be scared. There are too many people at the Damascus Gate.**

**But I was challenged, this Palm Sunday, to declare where my heart is. I know where I want to be, at the Beautiful Gate with the Peace-Bringer. But longing for peace and actually being peace are two different things.**

**I can understand the desire to strike back, to assume my own power in defense of my vulnerability. That desire to defend myself is part of my shadow, the warrior me, the Damascus Gate me that is my violence and what I need to protect myself and others from. It is a big job.**

**In my estimation, ministers who are worth their salt, give their hearts away. I don't mean in a sentimental or inappropriate way. I mean in a caring, want-the-best-for-you, willing-to-speak-the-truth way. Ministers have to risk relationship if right relationship is the goal. So, if I am to love the "you" whom I know, then you must know the "you" who holds your vulnerability. It is a matter**

of trust. I am crystal clear in my understanding of what ministry asks of me. I wish I were braver about living what I know.

Sometimes I am afraid of being too vulnerable and either want to hide or to put up a Jerusalem-like wall to defend my tender heart. And sometimes, when I am really scared, I will use my power of position or my learning or my experience to protect myself. Fear oozes out of my shadow and my shadow takes away my ability to love freely. Position, experience, or awareness are like my army streaming through the Damascus Gate of my life. I have the capacity to disempower others which doesn't really protect me. It robs me of my minister self, my best self.

I need to be at the Beautiful Gate with the one who has taught me how to love. I need to be in the Jesus-parade of faithful followers who draw the circle wide in love rather than hide away in fear. My personal Palm Sunday is about the courage to be open, loving, and free. It is about shedding the shadow that, on first glance, protects me, but in the end robs me of my loving agency.

My longing is to be at the Beautiful Gate today, with all of you whom I care about. We know the journey will have its challenges. Good Friday looms. But so does Easter Sunday, the day when love shows its power to lighten the shadow of fear.

The world needs as many lovers in the Hosanna parade as possible. Let's be there.