

## Sermon—Mark 11:1-11 and Luke Chapters 22-23<sup>1</sup>

*March 25, 2018- Palm/Passion Sunday*

The famed writer C.S. Lewis once said about the Christian faith that it is, "...a thing of unspeakable joy...But it does not begin with joy, but rather in despair. And it is no good trying to reach the joy without first going through the despair."<sup>2</sup> An apt description of Holy Week. What a blur, this final week of Jesus' life. One day it's the adoration of the crowds, a few days later it's the agony of the cross. How do we make sense of it? How do you make sense of this movement from palms to passion? How could it have all gone so wrong?

It starts with Passover; it was the beginning of the most sacred week of the Jewish year, a week that many Jews tried to spend in Jerusalem. Jesus wasn't from Jerusalem, he was from Nazareth, he was a country boy. Nazareth is to Jerusalem as Conestogo is to Toronto. He was an outsider who associated with outsiders; the poor, the disabled, women, foreigners and social outcasts. With the feast of the Passover looming though, Jesus feels the pull of Jerusalem; the centre of civic and religious authority for all of Palestine.

He decides to make a conspicuous entrance. Before you go thinking Jesus was grand standing, it's important to realize that Jesus' entrance wasn't the only parade in town that day. Scholars tell us that there probably had been an imperial parade that day as well, with Pontius Pilate as the grand marshal. Like his predecessors, Pilate made his home at *Caesarea Maritima*, or "Caesarea on the Sea," about sixty miles to the west, a splendid city on the coast. For the Romans, it was much more pleasant than Jerusalem, which was inland, insular and often hostile. But for the major Jewish festivals, Pilate, like his predecessors and successors, went to Jerusalem. He would have entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. The Romans wanted to be in the city in case there was trouble. There often was, especially at Passover, a festival celebrating the Jewish people's liberation from an earlier empire.

Imagine the imperial procession's arrival in the city, a display of power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armour, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful and almost all scared out of their wits.

Pilate's procession displayed not only Roman imperial power, but also it's imperial theology. According to this theology, the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome,

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<sup>1</sup> The first half of this sermon relies extensively and in some places quotes directly from the work of John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg in their book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem*

<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, Source Unknown

but the Son of God. This was no small matter for the Jewish people, this parade of Pilate's wasn't just a flexing of Rome's muscle but also of its religion.

There was nothing coincidental or accidental about these two events happening so closely together, Jesus plans it—he tells two of his friends to go on ahead and arrange for a donkey for him to ride. He rides in from the east down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus' procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God, a kingdom ruled by love.

Jesus knows that It's a kingdom that you can only reach by going down, not up. It's so hard for us, who've been raised to set ourselves apart—to stand out, to be successful, to stand on our own two feet. But, the way of Jesus is characterized by a downward pull. That disturbs many of us, it disturbs my middle class sensibilities. It's so hard to think about ourselves in terms other than those of an upward pull, an upward mobility, where we strive for better lives, higher salaries and more prestigious positions.<sup>3</sup> The American Lutheran Pastor and Writer Nadia Bolz-Weber puts it well when re-counting a story from a talk she gave; "I recently was asked by an earnest young seminarian during a Q&A, "Pastor Nadia, what do you do personally to get closer to God?" Before I even realized I was saying it, I replied, "What? Nothing. Sounds like a horrible idea to me, trying to get closer to God." Half the time, I wish God would leave me alone. Getting closer to God might mean getting told to love someone I don't even like, or to give away even more of my money. It might mean letting some idea or dream that is dear to me get ripped away."<sup>4</sup> The way to the Kingdom of God involves a lot of letting go, and a descent that takes us into relationship, community, gratitude, connection and the guidance of Grace. That's what we see in Jesus' final week, that's the movement from palms to passion. The movement from the human kingdom to the divine kingdom---a kingdom where love rules above all else. You can't get there on a war horse, only on a donkey.

The movement from palms to passion is about that love and how threatening it was to those in that other procession and their friends, to those who looked at love and saw not gain but loss. Love is often experienced as a threat when we're in positions of power, when we have a stake in maintaining the status quo. Just take a look at the news, at Bashar al-Assad in Syria, Vladimir Putin in Russia. Our modern history is rife with the names of Christians who have paid a price for proclaiming the way of love, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, Corazon Aquino of the Phillipines, Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa, Rigoberta Menchu of Guatemala. To the oppressed love is experienced as liberation, but to those in power, clinging to privilege, love is experienced as a threat.

Have you ever experienced love as a threat? Has someone ever loved you so much that they spoke a truth to you that you didn't want to hear? Even when they knew your

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<sup>3</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*.

<sup>4</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*.

reaction might cause them pain? How did you react? I haven't always reacted well. I have pushed truth tellers away. I have felt threatened by love. Have you ever been in such a vulnerable state where the most seemingly inconsequential act of kindness brought you to tears? In grief, in fear, in desperation little acts of love are experienced as liberation, freeing us from isolation, re-connecting us to one another.

The movement from palms to passion is a love story, a story of love's power to transform our world and of those who feel threatened by that power. The passion of Jesus Christ is a resounding "no" to the temptations of power, ego, fear and hate and a resounding "yes" to the power of love, community, hope and faith. For this he died. Two parades march through our lives, whose will we join? The answer depends on whether you see love as liberation or threat, whether you see the gain or only the loss. May God bless us with wisdom and compassion as we move into Holy Week.

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