

“It’s Kill or Be Killed”

A Palm Sunday Sermon by Zachary Helton for Lake Shore Baptist Church on March 25, 2018

Scripture: Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage and Bethany on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, he sent off two of his disciples with these instructions, “Go into the village just ahead of you and as soon as you enter it you will find a tethered donkey on which no one has yet ridden. Untie it, and bring it here. If anybody asks you, ‘Why are you doing this?’, just say, ‘The Lord needs it, and will send it back immediately.’”

⁴⁻⁷ So they went off and found the donkey tethered by a doorway outside in the open street, and they untied it. Some of the bystanders did say, “What are you doing, untying this colt?”, but they made the reply Jesus told them to make, and the men raised no objection. So they brought the colt to Jesus, threw their coats on its back, and he took his seat upon it.

⁸⁻¹⁰ Many of the people spread out their coats in his path as he rode along, and others put down greenery which they had cut from the fields. The whole crowd, both those who were in front and those who were behind Jesus, shouted,

“Hosanna” or “God save us!—’Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’ God bless the coming kingdom of our father David! God save us from on high!”

¹¹ Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the Temple and looked round on all that was going on. and then, since it was already late in the day, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Sermon: “It’s Kill or Be Killed”

You know, when it comes to religious life, one of my biggest pet peeves is untranslated words.

As words pick up so much religious baggage, I ache for the simplicity of a modern translation that cuts to the quick. Did you know that the word “angel” just means messenger? Did you know that the word “church” just means community? How about “devil,” which means someone who lies or accuses you to hurt you? Or “satan,” which just means “adversary?” Isn’t that simpler? Doesn’t that mean more, and hurt less? Is anyone else tired of annually having to look up “Hosanna” to remember that it means “God save us?” Or what about “gospel?” This one is a little more fun. “Gospel,” which means good news,” had its own kind of political baggage. Under the shadow of the Roman Empire, the disciples would’ve been familiar with the phrase from political propaganda. Whenever the Roman army would conquer and dominate a new territory, they would send around proclamations that would start “GOOD NEWS! We have brought about peace! A new country has been conquered. Thanks be to our savior, the Emperor!” This was the Gospel of the Empire. The Gospel of Jesus then, is so satisfyingly subversive. It undermines and re-defines the Imperial ideas of good news, peace, victory, and saviors, ideas that still thrive today and to which the Gospel of Jesus still poses a deadly threat.

I love it when I come across subversion and wordplay like this in our ancient stories. It breathes such life, such vitality and excitement into them for me. It reminds me that the early church was a community of brilliant activists and rebels against a culture of death, following Jesus’ lead, dangerously embodying Love, working within political language and customs to bravely challenge and subvert them, always at great cost. They turned instruments of domination into

instruments of healing community. This is today's story. This is the story of the indictingly mis-titled Triumphal Entry.

It's worth taking into account the timing of today's story. It's totally possible that Roman forces may have been riding into Jerusalem across town at about the same time as Jesus, amping up the city's security during the Passover festival. With this in mind, the Palm Sunday narrative reads similarly to the kind of parable Jesus would tell:

To what shall we compare the Reign of God? The Reign of God might be compared to two rulers. The first entered into the great city, surrounded by subjects that bent to the domination of his rule, but fostered hatred in their hearts. He entered with glorious, intimidating splendor, decorated with gold, on a great stallion draped in bright fabrics, guarded by armored warriors who sang praises to his resplendent triumph. "It's kill or be killed," was the motto of his Kingdom, and it had brought him great success. Everything about him sang out victory, and the people shouted their adoration for this man riding confidently into the conquered city.

The second ruler entered into the great city from a different gate, surrounded by devoted friends he met along his journey. He entered on a small donkey he had borrowed from a friend, with the sincere promise he would return it as soon as he was finished. Those with him, those whom most of us would hesitate to touch, sang songs of freedom, in a melody that rang bright with hope. Everything about him radiated humility and integrity, and the people took the cloaks off their backs and laid them down on the road in front of him, covering them with greenery. They welcomed him as he courageously rode into the treacherous city.

The reign of the first ruler ended, and the dominator became the dominated. But the reign of the second ruler, as odd as it is, continued to course vitally through history, embracing new citizens in ever-renewing and creative ways, with no end in sight. Amen.

Like the parables of the prodigal son, the good Samaritan, the two debtors, the Pharisee and the publican, Lazarus and the rich man, and so on and so forth, here there are juxtaposing characters, some trusting in God and the others in ego, and like any of the parables, there is a remarkable and confusing twist at the end that invites you deeper into a mystery: One reign ended. The other thrived. It defies the Empire's logic.

The author of Mark sets the scene on the cusp of the Passover, when all of Israel is making its way to Jerusalem to re-tell one of their most sacred and subversive stories. The Exodus is a story of liberation from an oppressive Empire, and the destruction of the enemies of Israel, or as one theologian calls it, "the one where God gives the Empire a bath." You can see how this might make Rome a little more cautious than usual. They brought in troops, security, and even the man who would become one of the most infamous Bible characters, Pontius Pilate. And it gives me great satisfaction to imagine the triumphant procession of Pilate into Jerusalem from one gate as Jesus anti-triumphantly enters from another. When you put them together, you see the parable. You see Jesus' subversion, his re-definition of glory, his re-definition of a God, almost poking fun at the grand procession going on across town.

It's fun, and energizing to watch it play out... but then you start to get the impression that the people surrounding Jesus might not get the joke. With the energy of the Exodus story buzzing in their spirits, they shout and sing, "God save us! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! God bless the coming kingdom of our father David!" And it's there, right there, that I'm inclined to think, *Uh oh*, because I remember Jesus preaching a lot about the Kingdom of God, but not so much about the Kingdom of David. For them, the Kingdom of David was the Golden Age of Israel, the peak of their power and glory, when they had all the freedom and power, and when it was Israel, not Rome, that did the dominating, free to oppress whoever they chose.

“Jesus, you can Make Israel Great Again!” they might be shouting, “It is time for our own military parade!” ...and you get the impression that perhaps they’ve missed something.

But you know, who can blame them? It is not a sin to long for a Reign that will grant you justice and liberation. Don’t we still feel the ache today? Two weeks ago, I stood at the microphone on Wednesday night and announced three different protests, every one of them, at least in part, led by members of our own community. We still feel the ache of brokenness, and the drive to march alongside God, embodying the healing that Jesus embodied. We long for justice, for Love, for God to win the victory! But I wonder, when we imagine victory, if we have the same thing in mind that Jesus did, or if we’d rather have a Jesus that looks a whole lot more like a Roman ruler familiar with the sweet taste of winning battles. And then I wonder if the author was not only being subversive about the Empire, but about me and you. I wonder if the author intends us to identify on some level with those shouting Hosanna, with those longing for a cheaper and more comfortable version of the Kingdom of God. And now I’m in a difficult place, because now I don’t get to just point at Rome and laugh, because the story isn’t about them anymore. It’s about me.

It’s not so hard to recognize this if we’re honest about how unsatisfyingly this story unfolds. For instance, Jesus clops into town not on a horse, not on the backs of slaves, but on a donkey. It’s not even his donkey! It’s just *some guy’s* donkey! His disciples go into town and just start untying this donkey, and the people watching say, “Hey, what are you doing with that donkey?” and the disciples wave them off, “It’s cool, our friend needs it,” and as if this is a satisfactory explanation, the bystanders say, “Ohhh, okay, well if your friend needs it.” Can you imagine this happening today with a car? And then, Jesus doesn’t even keep the donkey! What kind of King won’t even steal a donkey from a peasant?

And then there’s the ending! He rides up on a donkey, people are throwing their cloaks and greens into his path, they’re singing songs of joy and liberation, gearing up for him to bust in and

challenge the Empire's rule, so Jesus marches right up to the temple, looks around, throws back his shoulders and says, "Well, it's late, I'd better be headed home." Excuse me? This is like Forrest Gump, amassing an army of followers running behind him, then turning around and going, "I'm pretty tired, I think I'll go home now." Or maybe we're not giving Jesus enough credit, maybe he was just so flustered by what he saw that he he had to go home and regroup before coming back the next day and flipping over the tables. Maybe it's more of a, "I literally can't even with this place," Jesus. Regardless, it's not the kind of ending to this story that tells us we've got a good grip on what's going on. It throws us, it bucks our expectations. And that is also what is challenging about this story.

There is an old story about a man named Nasruddin who became prime minister to the king. Once, while he wandered through the palace, he saw a royal falcon. Nasruddin thought, "I have never seen this sort of pigeon before!" So he got out a pair of scissors and trimmed the claws, the wings, and the beak of the falcon, making it appear far softer and more manageable. "Now! There you go!" he said. "You look like a decent pigeon! Your keeper has obviously been neglecting you."

The Bible claims that "God created humanity in God's own image," and one wise author adds the addendum, "humanity has been returning the favor ever since." If our stories are to be believed, and our tradition and experience is to be honestly observed, then we have always been far more adept at molding God into what we expect a god to be rather than allowing God to mold us into what God expects a human to be. After all, to change, to be transformed, requires a death of some kind. It requires the death of our ego, the false definitions of ourselves, the need to indulge ourselves to the detriment of a peaceful and just future... each of these must be offered up as a sacrifice. But, as the story this week is about to unfold, it turns out we are far better at killing God than allowing God to kill these parts of us.

Left unchallenged, many churches tend to treat Palm Sunday like a mini-Easter. One pastor called it “Easter Lite.” It plays into our expectation that Jesus storming into a city is the beginning of victory. It’s kind of confusing, while we watch kids skip in singing happy songs and waving palm branches, we might forget the dark purple fabric that still hangs overhead. To many of us, a triumphal procession into a city to dominate the enemy and enforce justice might look exactly like what we expect of God’s victory. But this story just isn’t what we want it to be. Perhaps this is how the violent god of much religion wins over evil, but it’s not how Jesus wins. This is not how Love wins. Less than a year from now, these palms we wave will be nothing more than ash smeared across our foreheads.

And maybe that ageless misunderstanding is, in fact, the culmination of our Lenten journey. Perhaps this is the most insidious communal sin we have to face: the drive to make God into our image rather than opening ourselves to be re-formed into the loving, non-violent, humble, embarrassing image of God we see in Jesus. Think about it, about the stories you know of the wandering Rabbi who changed the world. He makes his home among the undignified and oppressed, he’s a healing challenger who totally abandoned himself to God. Is this really the Jesus of our religion? Is this really the Jesus you know so intimately, that every time you look in a mirror, you look more like him? Are you always dying, so that he can live in you? Or are you killing him, so that you might survive? Turns out the first ruler was on to something after all: “It’s kill or be killed.”

This is the question we must now face, in the darkest hour of our Lenten pilgrimage. May we cling tightly to God’s grace over the course of this week as our cries turn from “Hosanna!” to “Crucify!”