



For Such A Time As This

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday, March 25, 2018
Selections from Mark 11, 14 & 15*

Today is Palm Sunday. We begin this day by remembering what has traditionally been called Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem riding on a colt. The Jewish people hailed him by strewing the ground with palm branches like the fronds we wave today, and by chanting the words that we always sing during the Eucharist: Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna, Hosanna. Even though today we also hear about Jesus' Passion—his betrayal, arrest, and death, I want to focus on Jesus' entry into Jerusalem because it contains such a radically liberating truth for us in our lives today, perhaps now more than at any other time in human history.

Let me explain why. The people of Israel at the time of Jesus were chafing under Roman rule and longing to be free to govern themselves and worship God freely. And so they wanted their own king, a king from the line of David. David had been the first King of Israel to go to war and defeat all Israel's enemies, so that they finally had peace. At the time of Jesus, Israel wanted to defeat Rome so they could live freely in their own land.

And they could actually imagine it would be possible to be free of Rome, because embedded deep in Israel's identity as a people was the memory of the Passover, the story when God had liberated them from slavery in Egypt, a story about when God defeated the most powerful kingdom on earth and set slaves free, without an army. And so in Jesus' time, the annual celebration of the Passover was a time when Jews took courage from their history. Sometimes Passover would result in revolts and outcries against Rome. And because of this, every year just before the

Passover, the Roman governor of the region would come marching into Jerusalem with a large contingent of soldiers and the machinery of war. They came as a visible reminder of the power of empire, to prevent and crush any Jewish uprising that might result from celebrating Passover.

And that's exactly what Rome was doing during the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem right before the Passover. Pontius Pilate, the Governor of Idumea and Judea and Samaria, was making a big show of entering Jerusalem from the West with a lot of soldiers and visible military might. And at the same time, historians tell us that Jesus came riding into Jerusalem from the East, from the Mount of Olives. The gospel reading tells us Jesus planned this, very deliberately – he sent his disciples to retrieve a colt for him. And the prophet Zechariah in the Hebrew scriptures had foretold that a Messiah would enter Jerusalem on a colt and would make an end of the chariot and the warhorse and the battle-bow, and would command peace to the nations.¹ So when Jesus entered Jerusalem on a colt the people understood it instantly—it matched Roman military entry on the other side of the city and also fulfilled Jewish scripture. So they got very excited thinking that Jesus might be the one to throw Rome out of the city and make them free by founding a new Israelite empire like King David had done before.

But Jesus had already told his disciples exactly what he knew was going to happen when he entered Jerusalem. He told them three times in the Gospel of Mark that he would go to Jerusalem, and be betrayed, and rejected by the leaders of his own people, and be spit upon and mocked and killed by the oppressor—and that three days later he would rise again. He was indeed coming to establish another kingdom. But he knew that the realm of God could not be brought about through violence, even the violence of self-defense, even the violence of ending oppression, even the violence of hating our enemies.

So you see, the two opposing marches into Jerusalem were not the clash of Roman might against Jewish might. Jesus was saying that the power of empire can never be defeated by empire. Whoever loses his life for the sake of the gospel will

¹ Zechariah 9:9-10

find it, he said. Whoever realizes that the nonviolent realm of God is worth our very blood will finally receive and enact the good news of Jesus Christ. The good news of Jesus Christ is that even our enemies, even those who are violent and wish to oppress or dehumanize or hurt us, are beloved children of God whom Jesus asks us to love even as we resist the evil they promote. To love our enemies means we must resist their evil while refusing to do violence to them in thought, word or deed, even at great cost to ourselves—because they too are created in the image of God, and because no one is beyond God’s redemption. In fact Walter Wink said that in modern times, the litmus test of being a Christian is the power to love our enemies.

Yesterday I went to the St. Paul Capitol building with thousands of others. I stood with many other Episcopal clergy and laypeople and alongside ministers and people from many kinds of faith communities, to watch youth, who do not yet have political or financial power of any kind, make a procession to the center of power in our metro area to ask for change. Some of our St. Stephen’s youth were there yesterday, and to you I want to say a special thanks and to honor you for your courage. They asked that adults end their divisions in order to take effective action to prevent the conditions that lead to mass shootings, including commonsense gun laws. No matter what your personal opinions are about the particular requests of these young people yesterday, their nonviolent procession into the center of power yesterday mimics Jesus’ nonviolent procession into the center of power at Jerusalem, to announce a new order, the realm of God.

Jesus’ procession into Jerusalem was about power, but not power in the usual sense. Jesus was claiming a lordship and a powerless power that supersedes any other, that is based in radical love, even of our enemies—whether your enemies are bullies at school or terrorists or Democrats or Republicans or ideologues or just your ex. The powerless power of Jesus’ way is utterly liberating and also demands everything that we are. Because we encounter the power of empire, the power of violence and control and domination, in every aspect of our personal and public lives -- not just in the national debate over guns or any other of the issues that so divide us. We also encounter empire within our own selves, in the

endless temptation to dominate or ignore or discount each other instead of making space for others, seeing God in them, listening to them, and inviting them to live into the fullness of their created goodness in the realm of God.

As we celebrate the Eucharist in a few minutes, which is our Passover, and as we move through Holy Week, we are invited to identify with Jesus, to die and rise again with him. Every time you encounter the power of empire in yourself or in the culture around you or in someone who is treating you without respect, I invite you to recall the image of Pontius Pilate and Jesus entering Jerusalem from opposite ends. There is always a choice between empire and nonviolent love. Jesus' courage cost him his life, but it sparked a movement that is still generating life and strength to his followers all over the world. His entry into Jerusalem was not for the Jews of first century Palestine only. It was for oppressed people everywhere, and it was also for oppressors everywhere. It was for followers of Jesus across time and space who are given grace to claim the power of nonviolence and loving their enemies. It was for all those who have created nonviolent change, from Martin Luther King to Solidarity in Poland and Gandhi in India and young people marching to the capitol, and those quiet heroes who have stood up to bullies at school and abusers at home. It was for those who are willing to risk everything to participate in God's realm, resisting evil in themselves, knowing death is not the worst thing that can happen to a person. It was for the 21st century, when the power of violence and destruction and hatred has never been greater, and also the power of nonviolence and goodness and love without conditions. It was for such a time as this.