***7 Stops on the Road to Resurrection: #6 Resolution***

*a sermon for Palm Sunday, March 24, 2024*

*Rev. Scott Dalgarno based on Mark 11:1-11*

Scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, writing together about the Palm Sunday story, tell us that not one but rather, two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in what would come to be called the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year. One was a peasant procession, the other was an imperial procession.

From east of the city, Jesus came, riding a donkey, cheered on by those friendly to itinerants like him. Jesus and his followers had come, on foot, to Jerusalem from Galilee where Jesus had been born and grew up. Galilee was located about 100 miles to the north so they had been walking for several days.

On the opposite side of the city, from the west came Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idu-mea, Judea, and Samaria. He would have likely entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. These were both festive parades, but they could not have been more different.

Jesus’s procession proclaimed the reign of God. Pilate’s proclaimed the power of empire. Fact is, the two processions embodied the central conflicts of the week that will lead to Jesus’ crucifixion.

Here is how that played out. It was standard practice for the Roman governor to be in Jerusalem during festival occasions, not out of reverence for religious devotion, but in case of trouble. This was especially true in case of Passover.

I mean, it was a festival that celebrated the Jewish people’s liberation from an earlier empire: Egypt, during the time of Moses. The mission of the troops under Pilate, was to reinforce the Roman garrison permanently stationed at the Fortress Antonia, overlooking the Jewish temple and marble courts in Jerusalem.

But Pilate wasn’t often in the city. He lived in Caesarea, a splendid new city, sixty miles away, right on the Mediterranean coast. It was easily defended and smelled pleasantly of the sea.

This would be like our governor, Tina Kotek, coming up Naito Parkway into Portland from bucolic Marion County with a huge police escort to be part of the Rose Festival’s Grand Floral Parade.

So, imagine Caesar’s imperial procession arriving in downtown Jerusalem. It was visually stunning, complete with cavalry, foot soldiers, leather armor, fancy helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles.

The sounds were equally remarkable. It included the sound of marching feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums.

Everyone could feel the sound of the emperor’s power going right through their bodies. But Pilate’s entry was about more than imperial power, it was also about imperial theology.

According to Roman thinking, the emperor was not only the ruler of Rome, he was also the Son of God. That’s what he was called. Former emperor Augustus was said to be the offspring of Apollo.

Yes, and the emperor was not only Son of God, inscriptions refer to him also as “savior,” “lord,” and guarantor of “peace on earth.” Of course, these are all familiar terms to Christians. That means that our sacred Christian terminology is, by nature, political and seditious. It is meant to call into question everything Rome says about itself to stay in power.

*Peace on earth*. The Romans are remembered to have called this *Pax Roman*a. Roman peace. But what that peace amounted to was really just the heels of Roman military boots on the necks of the peasantry.

I’m afraid it’s very like white supremacist legislators in Georgia, passing draconian bills to keep black people from voting and calling it, “election integrity” when everyone knows it’s just Jim Crow legislation. It’s appalling.

Well, Augustus and his successors faced a problem making peace an acceptable mode of life for the Romans. You see, they had been at war with one power or another continuously for more than 200 years.

Romans regarded peace not just as an absence of war. For Rome, peace only existed when all opponents had been beaten down so hard and so far that they had lost any ability or will to resist.

Augustus issued coins with his likeness in one side and the word, *Pax* on the reverse. But it was only propaganda, and people generally knew it. Jesus certainly did.

Jesus doesn’t recognize the emperor’s peace as peace at all. When coming over the ridge and first spying Jerusalem that morning, off in the distance, he is quoted as saying …

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, O that you knew the things that make for peace,

but they are hidden from your eyes.” Caesar and his henchmen down the ages to Vladimir Putin know nothing about what peace really is.

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem at the same time as Pilate’s entry is no coincidence. Jesus’s entry on a donkey is an intentional counter-procession. Jesus planned it in advance.

His followers lay down palm branches and their garments on the road as he comes down from the Mount of Olives on a colt, the foal of a donkey. They do this because he is the kind of king peasants can gladly get behind; one without weapons, trappings of office, or war-horses.

They know that Pilate’s procession is meant to make them very afraid, with its trappings of war and intimidation, Jesus’ procession embodies an alternative vision. The reign of God (not the kingdom of Caesar).

The reign of God. Several times in the gospels Jesus asks the question, “What is the ‘kingdom’ of God?”

Answering his own question, he speaks of, among other things, mustard seeds – seeds that are tiny, but which grow into huge bushes.

When speaking of the reign of God, Jesus is obsessed with the idea of it being hidden; he speaks of it being like a seed hidden in the ground, grain hidden in the ear, yeast hidden in the dough, a treasure hidden in a field,

a pearl hidden in a shop, a net hidden in the depths of the sea.

Then, thinking of the welcoming nature of God, he mentions a table laid out with a great surplus of food, in which few if any are **not** welcome.

But on Palm Sunday he demonstrates that he himself is the bearer of this hidden kingdom.

That is to say, he is a king, unlike Caesar.  He has none of the values of an empire.  None. But he knows the world is dying as a result of Caesar’s oppression; dying for lack of recognition of the grace of God.

The peace Jesus talked about was not one in which common folk felt beaten down and second rate. No; when he speaks of peace he says, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world gives, give I unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

Yes, and Jesus died as a direct result of the *Pax Romana*.

Let me tell you how I believe it happened. In Jesus’ day, Rome was a large empire geographically. But its large size actually underscored its weakness, not its power.

Why? Because being a large empire, Rome was spread very thin. They had only so many soldiers. And they had to ration them out around the empire.

So, when it came to ruling the land they called, Palestine, they could only control the capitol city, Jerusalem.

Consequently, Jesus, who lived several days walk from Jerusalem carried out his ministry, speaking as he did of the reign of God in the country- side, with nearly complete impunity.

Rome wouldn’t touch him up in the region of the Galilee where he spent his whole life. Rome didn’t care what he said there, in fact.

Of course, the Jewish religious authorities cared, and he would get in trouble with them from time to time, but not with Rome.

Rome ignored most everything outside Jerusalem, but not within. They were a minority in Jerusalem too, but they were well armed in the city and wielded an iron fist.

Yes, and the time of year the Roman presence in Jerusalem became feverish, due to its extreme minority status, was during the festival of the Passover. At that time the city was crowded with thousands of peasants.

At such times the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, became quite anxious.

He knew very well, that thousands of Palestinian peasants armed with as little as clubs and a few knives, could overwhelm his Roman guard.

Think of the storming of our nation’s capitol by a misguided mob. Well, it was unthinkable here until it happened. But Caesar and his minions expected such things.

So, any disturbance within the walls of the city was dealt with quickly and fiercely. No matter how minor.

Rome would stand for no nonsense. Someone going into the temple and raising the least ruckus, quickly became an example to the rest. That’s why those who were arrested were hoisted up on crosses, not executed summarily indoors.

Rome wanted to say, “Look at this man’s agony. You could be next.

NO, you WILL be next, if you step out of line.” They had little power beyond terror, but they used it surgically.

Jesus knew this, but he could not help himself. He saw what a business the elites were doing within the temple grounds and it made him crazy.

Instead of the Temple being the great leveling place where Jewish peasants and Jewish kings could rub shoulders under one God, it had become a place where the 1% made a killing.

We can be sure that that was what he was so angry about because it was the tables of the 1% he threw over there in the temple grounds.

Yes, and that made him Exhibit A when it came to finding an example to put on a cross to frighten the populace. Simple as that.

You know, the Bible, at its heart, is about God’s passion for God’s creatures to make this a different kind of world, a world in which all people have enough. Not a lot. Enough.

And this will come to them, not as a result of charity, but as a result of justice. That’s what the $1.9 trillion dollar Covid bill was about, you know. Trying to lift those who were hurting the most and also the rest of us who are far from rich.

The world God wants us to create is one in which we all come to have God’s sense of justice. It’s a world where there is no more war, yes, but it’s more. It’s a world where peace means more than that.

The idea of justice has to do with human beings valuing people’s work, not welfare. As such, it calls for us all to support a minimum standard of reward for that.

So it’s good that with the fossil fuels industries slowly coming to the end of their long run, and the service industry on the rise, we think about new ways to support people who do so much for us, especially since most native-born Americans don’t want to dirty their hands with such work.

We need to think in new terms about such things.

We need to find a way to create a society where people, immigrants and natives, can work and be respected and not feel impoverished in their wallets or their hearts.

I’m not talking about a form of welfare that cuts people’s ambitions off at the knees. No, if I am not mistaken, we are on the threshold of creating a society that values all work and advocates for that work to be valued at a level that doesn’t leave the children of working people hungry and without basic medical support, and a decent education that begins as early as it needs to.

This seems to me to be something we all should agree on in this country. I mean, it is at the absolute heart of the gospel of Jesus, but there is so much misinformation about this out there, coming from right wing Christians who ignore everything the gospels say about justice. It’s just sad.

The recent trillion dollar federal investment in our crumbling infrastructure is a huge investment in the lives and hearts of our citizenry and it is serving to grow the previously shrinking middle-class, which in turn has made our economy the hottest economy in the world.

The kingdom of God, as Jesus imagines it, is a place where we all celebrate such good fortune. It’s a world where we understand that when one of us goes down, we all go down. And when the least of us rises in the world, we all rise.

With all the lies out there on social media these days that’s hard for many people to get, but it is at the heart of everything Jesus ever said or did, and I think most people who actually look into the gospels for any time at all and find themselves looking at Jesus, eye to eye, come to see that.

They may not like it. They may even bridle against it. But they usually come to acknowledge that look in his eye that will not let them dismiss him all together.

Let me sum up the meaning of Holy Week in Dr. Marcus Borg’s own words …

*On Sunday, Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem from the east in a procession riding on a donkey cheered by his followers. At the same time, a Roman imperial procession of troops and cavalry entered the city from the west, headed by Pilate.*

*The contrast between Jesus’ entry and the imperial entry sounds the central conflict that unfolds during the rest of the week. Jesus’ mode of entry on a donkey was symbolic, signifying that the kingdom, of which he spoke, was a kingdom of peace.*

*According to the prophet Zechariah, the king entering Jerusalem on a donkey was to banish the weapons of war from the land and speak peace to the nations. The kingdom of Rome on the other hand was based on violence and the threat of violence.*

*It is clear from Mark’s gospel that Jesus pre-arranged this way of entering the city. In modern language, it was a planned political demonstration.”*

*Let me add, in closing, that it was also religious: Jesus did so because of his passion for God and God’s desire that authoritarian rule carried out with lies and the threat of violence be vanquished when and wherever it should pop up.*

*Amen*