

Tell Me Something Good

The Good News Is . . .

. . . inspiring us to act

Southminster Presbyterian Church

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Palm Sunday Was a Protest by Nicolette Faison
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Texts: Mark 11:1 - 11

Prayer for Illumination

Holy One,
if we've heard this story before,
the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem riding on a donkey,
then help us to hear it again.
And if we've never heard this story before,
if we've never heard the story of Palm Sunday or the cries of "Hosanna,"
then give us the wisdom to follow along.
Give us the wisdom to hear these words.
Give us the wisdom to take them into our hearts.
Give us the wisdom to act on their truth.
We are listening.
Amen.

Sermon

What a great day today is! Our kids came in along with some others, waving palms and reeds. It's a day that we, as the larger church, remember with a sense of triumphalism.

Yesterday some of us participated in the No Kings protest. I went to the one in King City. I know some of you went to one in Beaverton. Some in Portland. I remember mentioning these protests to you weeks and weeks ago. The date was set long in advance.

I always had the sense that the date for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on the donkey was like a pop-up protest. He rode in and people somehow just found out and gathered. I now realize that it was not totally like that.

I keep mentioning the oppressive rule of the Romans. It was horrible. And also true is that the Romans were horribly afraid of the Jewish community. Mostly they had them so under their thumb that there was no problem. But Passover represented to the Roman government a fearful time. So many from the Jewish community traveled to and gathered in Jerusalem each year that it was beyond crowded. It was packed as if there were a super bowl or a Taylor Swift concert. Hotels would be full and anyone that had family in Jerusalem would go and stay with them. It was an annual pilgrimage for many and perhaps a bucket list item for those who lived farther away.

Where they saw celebration, Romans saw potential for revolt. It was the time of year when they were most afraid that a joyful celebration would turn into unplanned chaos. Something like January 6. To be fair, the Romans weren't completely paranoid for no reason. Passover was a time of increased volatility. Before Jesus was in the picture, there was a revolt and 3,000 Jews were killed. A few decades later, there would indeed be a deadly revolt with thousands killed on each side of the conflict.

Passover commemorates the fleeing of the Jewish people from Egypt. They were slaves in Egypt, but they had grown exponentially in numbers. After the numerous plagues during "negotiations" with the pharaoh, they prepared under the cover of night and fled, taking plunder as they went.

Our scriptures follow the Jewish nation, so we watch as they find their way forward. We don't hear about the economic and social collapse that Egypt

necessarily experienced. But perhaps the Romans find themselves fearful of such things. Losing the taxes from the Jewish community alone would cripple parts of their economy.

Rome had taken to making a show of their power as a means of squelching any intentions or thoughts of rebellion. And they went all out. When the Jewish people gathered in Jerusalem, they put on a military parade.

The Roman governor didn't live in Jerusalem. He lived sixty miles away by the sea. But every passover he would come. He arrived in power. He entered through the front gate—the west gate. He brought with him war horses, military men in their full armor, chariots, the whole shebang! As he entered, he expected – and was – greeted by the citizens who were awed by the show. They were to hail him for all his power and might. They would line up as one does for a parade. But this Jewish crowd was resentful. Maybe silent. They knew the show of power was a symbol of their oppression. They couldn't stop it, but nor did they welcome it.

But this year there was another parade planned. And it does seem it was planned to some extent. Jesus knew the Passover drill. He knew that the Romans would enter through the west gate on a gorgeous and powerful horse. And he planned something different. But not just anywhere. As the Romans entered in power through the west gate, he entered through the east gate. His entry mirrored theirs. The governor entered on a powerful war horse or perhaps in a chariot. Jesus entered on a donkey. And not just any donkey. A never-before-ridden colt. I don't know much about young donkeys, but I do know young horses. The first ride is a thing and it would not be recommended to do it in the midst of crowds and noise. But Jesus did.

I've mentioned that in the training some of us went to with the organization called The Together Lab, they shared various acts of resistance. I continue to think about them and two in particular as I thought about the No Kings protest and about Palm Sunday. Among others, they list joy as an act of resistance. And also taking up space. We did that yesterday. There was a joyful aura as people held their signs decrying the current use of power and oppression of people. And we took up space on the sidewalks and streets. There was joy as inflatables brought smiles in the midst of making a clear statement of protest.

As Jesus entered into Jerusalem directly mirroring the Romans coming in from the other side of town, this was a statement of both power and humor. They enter west; we enter east. They enter on a war horse; we enter on an unbroken colt. They throw about power and wealth; we line the street with palm branches.

As he enters on this young donkey, the people welcome Jesus with waving palms like we did at the beginning of the service. And putting their cloaks—their coats—on the ground for him to ride over. Like a biblical red carpet. And they called out: “Hosanna! Hosanna!” And “Blessed is the *king* who comes in the name of the Lord!”

This is where stuff gets real. This is sedition. This is rebellion. Why? Because “Hosanna” actually translates as please save us or deliver us! And “Blessed is the KING”??? This is rebellion that isn’t even veiled. And the crowds are there for it. The silence and resentment felt at the west gate is supplanted by cheering and enthusiasm at the east gate. These are a people starved for good news. And in Jesus’ entry they have found it. In Jesus’ entry they have found a place to express joy and an unexpected way to take up space. In the midst of an oppressive regime . . . in fact right under their noses, they claimed space and joy that was not supposed to be theirs. They dared to call a radical rabbi king and call upon him to save them . . . to deliver them.

As we head into this holy week, we know that things did not go as they might have hoped. These same hopeful people will call for Jesus’ execution. But today we choose to suspend our knowledge of the future and remember that in being for the underprivileged, the under-resourced, the oppressed, the poor, the outcasts, Jesus gave them hope in a most unlikely manner. Jesus showed that he would lead in peace where systems led with power. He would lead with compassion where others led with coercion. And so we follow. We lay our palms in adoration. And in commitment to leading with peace and compassion. And until we see those replace power and coercion, we will protest and resist with joy.

Amen