

The Price of Peace

sermon digest

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Luke 19:29-42, 45-48

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It was a moment of high drama. People were flooding into the city. Normally the home of a mere 40,000 people, Jerusalem swelled during Jewish festivals with the influx of as many as 200,000 pilgrims. As is often the case with thronging crowds, tensions escalated; and they particularly escalated during the celebration of Passover. Celebrating the deliverance of the Jews from Egyptian oppression, the festivities could not help but remind the Jewish people that they currently languished under the thumb of Rome. In recent years, resentment had boiled over into deadly riots. As Passover approached yet again, rumors flew; and a strange mixture of fear and anticipation gripped the entire city. The situation was nothing short of a tinderbox. Any spark could set it off.

Picture now two processions: One coming in from the east—a procession of peasants led by a peasant. The other coming up from the Roman capital to the west—an imperial procession led by Pilate, governor of Judea. Riding on a stallion at the head of a column of soldiers, Pilate came to take up residence during the festival to assure crowd control. Coming from the east, Jesus comes on the back of a donkey, symbol of humility and peace. Two royal kingdoms—the ruthless kingdom of Rome and the kingdom “not of this world”—moving into direct confrontation with one another, a confrontation that would see Jesus hanging on a cross by week’s end.

Too often we have dismissed it all as a misunderstanding—or, worse, a manipulation. We paint the Romans as if they are somehow innocent bystanders, tricked by evil Jewish leaders into turning on a harmless Jesus. We paint the crowds as being at best fickle—singing Jesus’ praise at the beginning of the week, only to call for his crucifixion at the end of the week. Is this the way it was? A misunderstanding? Did Jesus, indeed, pose no threat? Was the crucifixion of Jesus, after all, simply a mistake?

The conflict that led to Jesus’s crucifixion was not Jesus against Judaism. Luke paints the barest scene of any of the Gospels of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. Luke includes no “hallelujahs,” no branches cut from trees, no palms, and despite one designation of Jesus as “king,” no reference to David or the throne of David. In Luke, even the crowd taking part in the commotion is different. Mark and Matthew include the throngs who have gathered for Passover; and John includes the crowds who surge forward to acclaim one who has raised Lazarus from the dead. But in Luke, the story is limited to those who have traveled along with Jesus. Along the way, they have overheard his teaching and witnessed his gracious acts; and just as they come down the Mount of Olives, before they even enter the city, they begin shouting and singing: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

Hardly are the words out of their mouths, however, when the tide turns. Luke inserts here a poignant scene none of the other Gospels include. As Jesus nears the city, he weeps: “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!” Writing barely a decade after the Romans’ utter devastation of Jerusalem (70 C.E.), Luke places a full blown lament on Jesus’ lips not unlike those of the psalmists and prophets of Hebrew scripture. Luke paints the utter heartbreak of the devastation that has by the time of his writing already taken place. Far from a vengeful Jesus spewing words of hatred and vengeance, what we have here is pure grief. Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem, that city whose very name means peace, is, in the words of Fred Craddock,

a voice of love and profound caring, of vision of what could have been and of grief over its loss, a tough hope painfully releasing the object of its hope, of personal responsibility and frustration, of sorrow and anger mixed, of accepted loss but with energy enough to go on [*Interpretation: Luke, 228*].

“Love . . . profound caring . . . loss . . . tough hope”—hear the words and the deep passion. What we see reflected in Jesus’ words is not the self-satisfaction of having been proven right either on the part of Jesus or on the part of Luke. What we have here is not one who has identified his own people as the enemy of God. What we have here are the words of a prophet, profoundly in love with his people and his God and pained to the depths of his soul at the tragedy being played out before his eyes.

Luke depicts Jesus going directly to the temple and beginning to drive out the merchants operating there. But notice the abbreviated story Luke tells compared to the other Gospels. Luke makes no mention of Jesus overturning the merchants’ tables or going after them with whips. The words Jesus uses are the words used previously as Israel’s prophets lamented the hypocrisy of those who

mistreated their own people and then presumed upon the safety of God's house. Like thieves retreating to the safety of their caves or dens to plot their next move, they went to the temple with the arrogant boast, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD," (Jere. 7:4). Nothing, they assured themselves, can harm us here.

In the face of centuries of misunderstanding and untold suffering, it is critical that we who would follow Jesus today not take the events of Holy Week as the pretext for even a vestige of anti-Semitism. The conflict that led to Jesus' crucifixion was not "Jesus against Judaism," Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan insist. "Much of the scholarship of the last half century, especially the last twenty years, has rightly emphasized that we must understand Jesus within Judaism, not against Judaism. Jesus was a *part* of Judaism, not *apart* from Judaism" [*Last Week*, 30]. Jesus was not cleansing the temple as one who despised it and sought to destroy it but as one who loved it and sought to purify it.

Jesus's entry into Jerusalem and the week of events that followed reveal Jesus on a collision course with Rome, and not just Rome, but with religious powers in collusion with Rome against the wellbeing of their own people. It is not the case of "Jesus against Judaism, or Judaism against Jesus" but of Jesus raising his voice in protest of religious leaders profiting at the expense of their own people. Far from acting contrary to the teachings of Judaism, far from disproving the validity of the Jewish faith, Jesus acted in accord with Judaism's prized heritage. Whether it was greed and the love of power manifested by the palace or the temple, the prophets spoke truth to power. And Jesus could do no less.

The conflict that led to Jesus's crucifixion speaks to the price of peace. As Luke tells the story of the entry into Jerusalem, Jesus is acclaimed with the message first heard from the angels at his birth, "Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" It's almost, Tom Long suggests, as if Luke drops a Christmas card along the path; and perhaps he does so advisedly. Perhaps he is signaling us that the peace greetings we so cheerily send at Christmas "come with a Good Friday price." Perhaps Luke is saying that rather than peace being a warm sentiment or cozy mood, it is marching orders to which Jesus himself was obedient and to which we must be obedient if we would be his disciples.

Palm Sunday, then, is no victory march. It is not about a king victorious in battle, but about one, who on weighing the alternatives, chooses to stay the course. It is about choosing integrity over expediency, faithfulness over abandonment, courage over fear. It is about Jesus, and it is also about those who surrounded him then and those of us who surround him now being confronted with the equally daunting choice of whether we, too, will stay the course or settle for a safer, less troubling alternative.

In all honesty, we would prefer a different world—a world in which the problems are not as thorny or contentious as those swirling around us. We might also prefer a different gospel—one delivering us into a sweet peace blissfully ignorant of or at least not responsible for addressing the issues that so vex us. But that is not the way it is in the company of one who set his face to go to Jerusalem. With him, we encounter the messiness of working in love on behalf of a real, not an imaginary peace. With him, we sit at table with those whom our world most loves to exclude. With him and because of him we put ourselves in the middle of the fray whether it concern issues of poverty, healthcare, racism, sexism, homophobia, immigration or battles over our shared national budget. With him we are attuned to suffering on the other side of the world and attentive to steps to alleviate that suffering.

Palm Sunday is about Jesus and his choice. It is also about us and our choice. What will it be?