

### **Palm Powered Protest**

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11

Some years ago I read a story about the pastor of St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig in what was once East Germany. During the Cold War, East Germans knew their country lay directly in the path of potential nuclear cross fire. The people were so powerless they did a crazy and ridiculous thing. They decided to go to church and pray.

That's where St. Nicholas came in. On Monday evenings a small group of people, usually no more than ten, would gather in the church to pray for peace. Government officials took notice. They infiltrated prayer meetings and looked for signs of revolution. The pastor told me he was careful to cut the microphone if anyone started to sound "too political." He didn't want the church to get fined or the prayer meeting to be shut down.

When some prayer group members applied for permission to relocate to West Germany, officials quickly granted the requests, glad to be rid of potential malcontents. But the plan backfired when word spread of this new way to emigrate. Tens and then hundreds and finally more than a thousand people started attending weekly peace prayer meetings, not just at St. Nicholas but at all the churches of Leipzig. It became a movement too big to ignore.

In October of 1989, word came down from Moscow: the peace prayers must be stopped. Troops from other states were sent to Leipzig to ensure soldiers wouldn't balk if ordered to shoot. Leipzig schoolchildren were told by their teachers not to attend the prayer meeting on October 9. The pastor's wife begged him to stay home.

But he did something else instead. He asked people to come to the prayer meeting not with weapons or gas masks but with **candles**. People thought he was crazy—what good could candles do against the might of the Soviet army?

I share this with you because Jesus started his *kingdom* movement by peacefully organizing, as well: by organizing people, ideas, money, and information, he and his followers challenged the power and legitimacy of their Roman overlords and the religious establishment aligned with them in Jerusalem—and it all came to a head on *Palm Sunday*, when the Jewish people were celebrating and

remembering their deliverance/liberation from slavery in Egypt in the Temple in Jerusalem at Passover.

Biblical Scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in their book, titled: *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem*, write:

*“Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30, ... one from the east largely composed of peasants, following a certain Jesus from Galilee riding a **donkey** down the Mount of Olives. On the opposite side of the city, from the west approaches the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, entering the city on a **war horse** at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. (Pilate) has come from Caesarea Maritima for the purpose of maintaining law and order during the potentially tumultuous days of the Jewish festival of Passover. Jesus’ procession proclaimed **the kingdom of God**, while Pilate’s proclaimed **the power of empire**, thereby embodying the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus’ crucifixion.”*

You see, Jesus and his followers have pre-arranged a “counter procession” into a city made tense by the heightened sensitivities of what may have been as many as 200,000 pilgrims crowding into the holy city of maybe just 40,000 regular inhabitants.

Matthew himself attests that when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city “was in turmoil” (v. 10), using a strong Greek words that literally means “was shaken” or “trembled” or “seismic.”

Furthermore, in answer to the tumultuous question, “Who is this?” Matthew reports that the crowds answer was, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee” (v. 11). This answer is underlined by Matthew’s reference of the prophet Zechariah (9:9-10) in which the triumphant king’s advent is portrayed as that of a peaceful monarch, “humble, and riding on a donkey on a colt, the foal of a donkey” who will “cut-off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem.”

Jesus and his followers, of course, are intentionally acting out this nonviolent procession into the city found in the text from Zechariah—something most of the

pilgrims gathered into the city for Passover would have been familiar with. *It's a big, bold, unmistakable statement of defiance to Rome!*

The welcoming crowd had access only to their own cloaks and branches cut from trees to carpet his way as they marked his progress with shouts of *"Hosanna to the Son of David."* "Hosanna" is one of those rare Aramaic words we find in the Gospels only in connection with Jesus' procession into Jerusalem. It's an exclamation of praise that literally means *"save (or help), I pray."* It's an appeal that became a liturgical exclamation for the church, after having long been familiar to Jews as a part of the Hallel liturgy used for prayer and thanksgiving on Jewish holidays, accompanied by the waving of branches, as we've seen in Psalm 118 today.

So, the question at the heart of Palm Sunday story (just who is this Jesus—this latter-day prophet from Nazareth in Galilee?) will take the events of the rest of the week to fully answer this question, but a good start toward an answer is implicit in the crowd's shouts of *"Hosanna!"* – *a word that becomes even more poignant* when its viewed within the context of the Jewish Passover liturgy called the *haggadah*, which reminds its participants:

*It was not only our fathers and mothers whom the Holy One ... redeemed from slavery; ... therefore it is our duty to thank, praise, pay tribute, glorify, exalt, honor, bless, extol and acclaim [the One] who performed all these miracles for our fathers and mothers and for us."*

These are ideas that Jesus and his followers are playing out in their procession.

And these ideas are infused with a call to ***communal faith, courageous proclamation, and conspicuous action*** [organizing people, ideas, money, and information]. It reveals the uncommon courage of common folk (regular people) who have experienced a presence so powerful, a message so compelling, and a love so complete that they transgress the boundaries of religious and civil acceptability to make the journey to Jerusalem with Jesus.

History, of course, is replete with stories of regular people who have recognized that we are able to accomplish more together than we can alone. They include stories of women and men who provided safe passage on the Underground

Railroad for persons seeking freedom from chattel slavery in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Remember also Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others in the Confessing Church in the 1930's, who took a definitive stance that their loyalty was to Jesus as Lord, not to Hitler and the Nazis. Young people in South Africa stood against apartheid and formed the African National Congress Youth League in 1944 under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, envisioning a world in which racial domination would no longer exist.

Many others join these exemplars of uncommon courage, including the 250,000 women, men, and children, from diverse racial, ethnic, social, and religious backgrounds who gathered in the U.S. capital on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1963, anchored in an abiding faith in God's gift of justice and human dignity. Like those who walked the dusty road to Jerusalem with Jesus, many of them made the pilgrimage at great personal risk, yet they marched to condemn the systematically oppressive laws that divided the nation.

In Leipzig, in the square outside St. Nicholas, there is a replica of one of the church's iconic pillars. On its base is an inscription commemorating the events of October 9, "*The day the church came out into the world.*" It need not be just one day. Palm Sunday calls us to join in God's work outside the church's walls, relying not on the power of what we hold in our hands but solely in the one who holds us.

We remember these stories and others so that we may find the courage to march with Jesus and proclaim a word of peace and reconciliation. After all, Jesus' followers possessed no formal authority to change their world, but neighbor and friend, stranger and distant traveler, children and adults marched into the city gates with Jesus to protest the exclusionary practices that had so long defined their existence.

Friends, make no mistake about it—Matthew's Gospel reflects early Christian identification of Jesus as Messiah—and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is recounted in Matthew as Messianic and triumphal.

But his messianic cause is *not* like that of imperial Rome, its puppet government cronies, compliant court prophets, propagandists, and hangers-on—those threatened by the rule of God's Messiah, ratchet up their security measures.

Rather, the messianic *lordship* of Jesus is defined by servanthood, gentleness, humility, peaceable-ness, mercy, and self-giving acts of generosity and compassion.

The spontaneous people's protest celebrating the arrival of this Jesus, prophet of Nazareth, as the gentle king, was liberating action—and intentionally done.

So begins the church's annual re-entry into the events of Holy Week—by marking how the empire of God, whose nearness Jesus came to proclaim and embody, looks to welcome quite a different kind of king indeed.