

Sunflowers Can Grow Anywhere

It's a glorious day with songs and shouts and palms and a parade. It was glorious that first Palm Sunday, too, but without palms, at least in Luke's telling. The shouts and the parade and Jesus riding a donkey are all there, just as they should be. And there are cloaks. Most people only had one cloak in Jesus' day. The few times I ran races longer than 3 miles in colder places, we were encouraged to wear layers of sweatshirts or jackets that we did not want back. We could cast them aside as we got warmer, and they would be collected and disposed of or given away. The cloaks in Luke's text are not disposable. They offer cherished security and necessary protection against the weather and the wind. To lay them down for a donkey to walk over means laying down something precious. The people must know that there's something different about the one who rides that young colt, something that inspires them to set aside what protects them for him. And then, in the midst of all the fanfare, Jesus stops to gaze over Jerusalem. [Read Luke 19: 41-44]

A few weeks ago, we heard Jesus' first lament about Jerusalem. While still miles away from the city limits, he spoke of wanting to gather her people under his wings like a mother hen, to protect them from all who would mislead, abuse, or trample them. Now as he is about to visit the holy city for a final time, he weeps over her, grieving that she has not understood or embraced "the things that make for peace." In the verses Casey read, we heard the Pharisees calling Jesus to shush his noisy disciples. They worry it seems about rocking the boat, about

upsetting the powers that be, about disturbing the peace and threatening the tricky balance between being faithful while protecting the people and keeping Roman authorities at bay. Rome has its own brand of peace, of course, the Pax Romana, an oppressive, enforced quiet, which is not peace at all. The peace that Jesus offers, the peace that he longs to share with the people of Jerusalem and of every nation has nothing to do with biting tongues or policing language or censoring stories or appeasing fickle dictators. The Greek word for peace has its roots in a verb which means tie or join together into a whole:

In the Greco-Roman world, [peace] was commonly understood as the absence of war and conflict, a concept highly valued in a time of frequent military campaigns. However, the biblical concept of peace extends beyond mere absence of strife to encompass a holistic sense of well-being and fulfillment. In the Hebrew tradition, this aligns with the concept of 'shalom,' which includes completeness, soundness, and welfare.¹

Jesus' peace is not about keeping quiet. Jesus' peace actively seeks to mend and repair what is broken and battered. This peace is not docile or submissive. It agitates and presses like a dandelion pushing through asphalt toward the sun, or perhaps like a sunflower planted in toxic soil.

Following the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in Ukraine, scientists planted sunflowers, because they have a superpower. The way the plants process nutrients enables them to metabolize radioactive waste. Sunflowers grow fast and almost anywhere. They do not need ideal environments to survive or thrive. They disrupt the destruction by absorbing the toxicity

¹ <https://biblehub.com/greek/1515.htm>

and taking the toxins with them when they are harvested. It's not perfect, and it's not magic. What worked beautifully in Chernobyl has not been as successful in Fukushima, but without these persistent plants and those who broke up the soil and planted them, there would be little to no hope at all. And when the sunflowers have done what they can, they are harvested and removed, to be disposed of as nuclear waste. The soil and the air left behind are richer and safer than they were before the sunflowers were planted, an environment where deep breaths and new beginnings are possible in a way they were not before.²

Jesus knows that the peace Rome demands, the peace that the Pharisees fearfully try to guard is not peace at all. It is instead an eerie calm created through oppression and enforced by coercion and control. The road Jesus travels into Jerusalem was likely lined with crosses, Rome's ever-looming warning and threat of torture and death for anyone who dared to speak out against the empire's rule, anyone who disturbed Rome's imposter peace. True peace does not respond to this imposed calm with a lullaby. True peace cries out, unafraid to name hard truths. True peace presses against lies and coercion. True peace recognizes that only in facing the hard truths can restoration begin and new life flourish. True peace craves the light and pushes through all that tries to bury it to reach that light, not just for one individual soul but for all of creation. The longing for peace means that even the rocks know to cry out when the world is not as it should be.

² <https://www.natureworldnews.com/articles/46890/20210729/scientists-plant-sunflowers-following-nuclear-disasters-heres-why.htm>

I wonder about all that would make Jesus weep over the world we know. Two thousand years after this parade, we still do not know or embrace the things that make for true peace, do we? I know I am tempted to play it safe, to go along and get along. I'm not a fan of rocking boats. And yet, I am called to follow this One who rides into the heart of Jerusalem on a donkey, embracing the image of a king who comes not to conquer with might but to reign with compassion, justice, love, and yes, peace. He will not run for cover or change his story. He will never settle for Rome's brand of peace. In fact, his very next stop along the way will be the Temple. There he will overturn tables and run off all who are bent on making a profit on the backs of poor pilgrims who have traveled for days to offer sacrifices and worship in this holy place where God is present in a particular way. And after disrupting the Temple in spectacular fashion, Jesus will return there to teach and proclaim the good news for the next few days. He will not be cowed by religious leaders or hide from Roman authorities. With courage and conviction, he will stand on the side of the lost and the least and the overlooked. He will not simply skirt by paying pretty lip service to the pain and the suffering he encounters. He will call out the hypocrites and the cowards who preach God's word and defy it with every breath. He will gather with his ragtag friends for a final meal and speak to them of body and blood given for them. Like the rarest of sunflowers, he will break up the tamped down sod of oppression, burrow his roots deep in the earth, and give his life to draw out every last toxic trace of greed, hatred, cruelty, and cynicism. They will carry his body away, thinking that he has done all he could and caused all the trouble he could manage. And after three long days, God will raise him

again to continue his work of radical healing and tumultuous peace-bringing, and he will ask his church to do the same.

Sunflowers can grow almost anywhere in the worst of conditions. We who find our truest identity in Jesus Christ are called to reflect the Savior he is, not the Savior we or others have decided he should be. We the church are tasked with bearing the true life-giving peace of a courageous and humble rabbi on a donkey who is welcomed to town by children waving palms and peasants casting down cloaks. This same rabbi embraces little ones of every kind, draws outcasts in from the margins, stares down oppressors, calls everyone to love God and neighbor, and gives up his life to save the entire world. We are created not to settle for anything that pretends to be peace—for ourselves or for anyone else. We are called to work for and share the peace that has been given to us in Jesus Christ, the peace that no one and nothing in this broken world can give. There is no place too godforsaken for God's peace to grow. Even now, God in Christ is at work saving me, saving us, saving the entire world. And so by the grace of God, we go from here in Christ's name to embrace the things that work for true peace: to shed the shells we clutch so tightly, to sink our roots deep down into the places where we have been scattered, to disrupt and break up the soil that tries to cover over and shush an embattled world, to bloom under the Son's light, and to join the joyful messy work of restoring and repairing all of creation in Christ's name.

Sunflowers can grow anywhere after all.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.