

The Rev. Seth Dietrich
March 24, 2024 – Palm/Passion Sunday

A Pitiful, Powerful Procession

Do you ever wish we could have Jesus without the ugly brutality of the cross? After all, doesn't Jesus give us more than enough in his life without having to rehearse the events of his death, as we will do soon? On MLK Day, we celebrate the Rev. Dr. King's life and legacy; we don't relive the assassination. We don't have people artfully depicting him slumped on the Memphis motel balcony. Yes, when we watch the footage of him, death is always there, hiding in the shadows of even his most triumphant moments, but we don't feel the need to dwell on the man's weakest, most defeated moments.

In contrast, when it comes to Jesus, hundreds of millions of people gather together to role play it all out. Not once but twice. On Good Friday and today.

And it's been like this since the very beginning of the faith, this borderline obsession with the passion and cross. A whole third of Mark's gospel is devoted to this final week in Jerusalem. And there are many, many layers of meaning in the cross. Many interpretations of why it is important; what it says about God and about us. The cross is like a crystal with a hundred facets. Today, I'll talk about just one. And that is the cross shows us a different kind of power. A kind of power based in love that looks foolish and weak, but it turns out that it can change the human heart, and it turn change the world.

We see this lesson about foolish power way before we get to Golgotha and the actual cross. In fact, we see it in the very beginning of the end, in this procession of the palms into Jerusalem. Two big names in modern New Testament scholarship are Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. They co-authored a book titled, *The Last Week*. One of the things they call attention to is that there was not just Jesus' procession into Jerusalem happening on a spring day in the year 30 A.D. There was another one, and it would have been well known in Jesus day. Every year before the Passover, the Roman governor of Judea would ride into Jerusalem just before the festival. He came not out of reverence or to engender affection from his occupied subjects, but simply to show raw, imperial strength.

The Romans occupied this area like they did all over the world. One of their secrets for building such a large and successful Empire, was to always let the people keep their religion. And for the vast majority of the world this was not a problem. Almost every population had multiple gods, and it was not hard for the locals to simply fold in the Roman Emperor as one more god, one more divine figure, as the Emperor himself claimed to be. But there was one religion that posed a real problem. This small, defiant, group in this somewhat random dry corner of the Empire just north of Egypt. This group insisted that there was only one God. And then to make things even

more tense, they had a festival every spring called Passover, in which they celebrated God's victory over the Egyptian oppressors 1000 years before. They got all worked up telling a story of liberation which ends with singing and dancing as they remembered whole legions of armed Egyptian soldiers and their horses and their chariots drowning in the Red Sea. So, if you're the occupier, you might just want to stay on top of that, in case any of your subjects get any funny ideas.

The ancients knew the power of a good military procession, in which you seek to overwhelm the viewer with the discipline of your fighting force, the glorious pageantry of your weapons. We can imagine this procession coming closer and closer to the city walls. At this point in Roman history, it would have been headed up by this particular equestrian knight who had risen through the ranks largely through making the right connections. He loved all the privileges of being the Governor of Judea, even if sometimes the job itself seemed impossible. His name was Pontius Pilate, and we can picture him on his tall, muscled, war horse, surrounded on all sides by a vast cavalry. Behind the cavalry, there were the foot soldiers, the sun glinting off their helmets, breastplates, the hilts of their swords. The sign of The Roman Emperor Tiberius was the Eagle, and throughout the procession you had men whose job was to lift high this heavy, solid golden eagle which sat on top of a long wooden pole. If you were there at the city gates you would have been covered by the dust, your ears taking in the heavy marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the incessant beating of drums.¹

And perhaps on the very day Pilate is parading the Golden Eagles of Rome, here comes this other procession which could not look more different. Jesus of backwater Nazareth, making his way into the city. It was a direct challenge to Roman power and authority. It was, in fact, a counter-procession to Pilate's. As Borg and Crossan say, it was "a planned political demonstration." In many ways, just a pitiful display.

The last time I was in Madison, there were a handful of people at the top of State Street, on the edge of the capital grounds, protesting for reducing nuclear weapons in the US arsenal. Maybe 6 people total, all over 70, some way over. Moving slow, holding these homemade signs, drawn with unsteady hands. So earnest and so pitiful. Do you have any idea what you look like?

That's kind of the image I have of this procession from Jesus. First, he chooses to ride into the city exactly the way the prophet Zechariah had predicted 500 years before. On a donkey. But not just a donkey, a young donkey, no more than 3 feet at the shoulder. If you're having trouble picturing it, imagine a grown man on the back of a large, friendly dog. No armor, no weapons, nothing resembling normal forms of power. The peasants lay down their filthy cloaks and his little dog-horse walks over them. This group of the misfits in ragged clothes and yellow teeth chanting and cheering, lifting up broken palm branches instead of spears. If you were a Roman

¹ The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem by Marcus J. Borg, John Dominic Crossan. HarperOne (2006)

soldier watching over it, you surely would have thought, “This is the most pitiful, most delusional thing I have ever seen.

Of course, we should probably acknowledge that 2000 years later, the fierce golden eagles of Tiberius have been melted and sold, the long imperial poles shattered. No one tells stories about Pontius Pilate or his war horse. In fact, Pilate becomes a bit player in another man’s story. An innocent man who absorbs the insults and hatred and violence of the world into his own body and instead of continuing the cycle of hatred and revenge, he stays silent, he offers love and forgiveness, he prays for those who are looking to destroy him. This story will slowly upend human culture, like a stone thrown into a still pond, the ripples go on and on and on.

Because Jesus opens up a new way to be human, a path of liberation, beautiful freedom. Jesus leads us through a new Passover, not out of Egyptian bondage, but out of bondage to our own small egos. We don’t have to keep track of all the wrongs done to us, so that we can one day strike back. We don’t have to look and sound wise and strong and important. We don’t have to wonder if a job is beneath us because we are already off our high-horse. We don’t have to rage and despair that the world does not bend to our wishes, because we know we are not the center of the story. We can be weak. Frayed. Broken. Because through the weakness of love comes the power and glory of God.