

“Crying and Courageous Prayers”

(7 of 9 in the Lenten series, “Prayer”)

Luke 19:28-40; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 22:63-23:56

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From the Pulpit

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A meditation delivered by The Rev Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Palm/Passion Sunday, March 20, 2016, dedicated to the memory of Darla Luebbe and Mike Bowersock and always to the glory of God!

“Crying and Courageous Prayers”

Luke 19:28-40; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 22:63-23:56

(Seven in the Nine Part Sermon Series, “Prayer”)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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We don't think of it this way now, but in the time of Jesus, the week of Passover was as much a time of civil unrest in Jerusalem as it was a religious festival. Jews from all over the region of Palestine would flow into Jerusalem for the holiday to celebrate the feast of liberation for their people. Historians of the time reported that the small City of David swelled in population ten times – from 50,000 to 500,000. It was not rare for riots to break out on the streets. There were demonstrations that arose against the Roman

occupiers. Historians told of scores and scores of Jews being killed in these demonstrations. Crucifixions, that is executing people by hanging them on crosses, was also a regular feature of Passover week in Jerusalem. After all, the **Romans didn't reach empire status by sitting on their swords in the face of resistance.**

If you think about it, it isn't hard to imagine demonstrations arising during Passover. I am sure you know the story of Passover. But, here is a brief recap. At the stroke of midnight of 15 Nissan in the year 2448 from creation (1313 BCE), God visited the last of the ten plagues on the Egyptians, killing all their firstborn. While doing so, God spared the Children of Israel, "passing over" the homes of the slaves whose doorposts were marked with Lamb's blood—hence the name of the holiday.

Pharaoh's resistance was broken, and he virtually chased his former slaves out of the land. The Israelites left in such a hurry, in fact, that the bread they baked as provisions for the way did not have time to rise (thus the unleavened bread eaten in this eight-day stretch). Six hundred thousand adult males, plus many more women and children, under the leadership of God and Moses, left Egypt on that day, and began the trek to Mount Sinai and their birth as God's chosen people.

I didn't take much imagination in Jesus' day to connect the dots. The Romans and Caesar were the modern day version of Egypt and the Pharaoh. They were taxed, beaten, arrested, imprisoned, crucified, driven from their land and treated like slaves in their own land of Promise. So, the average Jewish citizen – probably including Jesus – saw the threat and danger and not the promise and hope in the land God had given.

Is it any wonder that at the Passover each year, the Jews remembered their slavery of the past and how they had broken free and longed for this kind of freedom again? Is it any wonder that the longing turned violent?

With the regularity of riots at Passover, the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate had begun to make it a regular feature of the season to leave his headquarters in the beautiful Mediterranean coastal port of Caesarea fifty miles to the west and travel across the countryside in a great Roman procession that would deliver him to his palace in Jerusalem just in time to oversee the boiling mess the Roman occupiers despised among the occupied territory of Palestine. **It wasn't just a pompous parade that Pilate** proceeded to bring. He brought reinforcements to keep the peace until Passover had passed over the city. On warhorses and chariots, soldiers with swords in hand and Roman flags flying, Pilate came to town.

The message was clear: *“We are large and in charge. Don’t forget who is boss in this country! Caesar is God! He has the army to prove it. If you Jews know what is good for you, you will keep your freedom talk at your dinner table and in your house. Keep the symbolism of your festival but don’t mess with Caesar. And you will toe the line!”*

Let’s be honest -this was the modern equivalent of tanks and riot police, snipers on the roof tops and helicopters hovering everywhere overhead. It was the powerful telling the weak, “Stay in your place or else.”

The Christian scriptures never mention Pilate’s parade. You just can’t find it. You better believe Pilate’s historians were writing down every detail of this annual march from the sea to the mountaintop capital. Every feather, every flag and every weapon was noted by these folks.

But, in the Gospel Luke, we have already heard our hero, our Savior, the Galilean peasant from the town of Nazareth was coming in from the east (when Pilate was coming from the west). Following the prophecy of Zechariah, he came from the east on a beast of burden, a donkey who had never been ridden before. There were no chariots, no brass band, no swords, no soldiers, no pomp. There were people of all ages with palms raised high and then laid on the ground at his feet.

While at the Western gate of the soldiers were chanting “Caesar is Lord,” the crowds at the eastern gate were crying, “Hosanna (save us) Son of David. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the (true) Lord.” Jesus’ procession was a counter-demonstration. His entrance was a parody of Pilate’s parade. Jesus’ procession showed Pilate’s pretensions to power in the face of God’s power.

You might want to claim on any other Sunday of the year that Jesus didn’t get mixed up in the messy world of politics. But you cannot make that argument on this day. Palm Sunday shows that it is a myth that religion and politics don’t mix. The fact is, they cannot help but mix if we truly mean what we say, “God loves the whole of God’s creation and weeps when someone is hurt.” Jesus’ actions on Palm Sunday make it clear that the religion which bears his name is just a spiritual thing that happens in a person’s heart. It is also a social and political thing that happens in a community’s heart. When I say this, I am not talking about our faith being about Republicans and Democrats (although I would venture to say, we all have some thoughts on that in this week following the primaries in Ohio). But ours is a faith that challenges any economic or political arrangement that is not on the side of those who are most at risk, most vulnerable, and hurting in the hard streets and harsh homes of our city and world.

That man on that donkey rides into all our political debates and right into the middle of all the demonstrations throughout the world and sides with the ones who are vulnerable and disadvantaged. Riding into Jerusalem in the daylight, in a parade, into the middle of the political and religious center of his time, in the most highly charged week of the year, his message was clear – ***“Rome you are not in charge. God is in charge. And when you oppress people and hold them down, God will have a word with you.”***

All of you in this room also know that by the end of this week, this man on the donkey will be dead – hanging on a cross on a hill – at the hands of Pilate. Jesus knew what he was riding into on this day long ago. He knew he would be the causality of this year’s Passover. But he rode into Jerusalem anyway.

His Palm Sunday ride was courageous beyond belief. Convicted in the strength of God, Jesus showed that although you think you kill love and truth and goodness, God will simply raise it from the dead if you kill it.

This week will be filled with prayers. Our prayers are a mix of praise and promise and pain and tears. Against all odds, Jesus will demonstrate such courage on this day. Against all odds, he will show us how to overcome our tears and terrors. He will face down the powers that be. He will cry out to God in the garden of Gethsemane. He will sweat

blood when God does not answer his prayers. He will cry from the cross the prayer of anguish. He will show us how to live, how to die and ultimately how to rise from the dead. He will do this all through a continuous conversation with God – one which will challenge the powers of this world.

I pray that you enter the fullness of this week. That means – I pray that you walk the labyrinth, come to the Maundy Thursday dinner and Tenebrae Service and come to **Good Friday night's passion service** – before returning for Easter Sunday next week.

I pray that you listen to **God's story**. I pray that you feel the pain, cry the tears, and enter into the fullness of Jesus' story. But, for now, I pray that enter this week from the east gate. Be in the Jesus parade. And remember, even though the Pontius Pilates of this world kill Jesus and all that he rides for and that he stands for, the Son rises in the east. **He who is God's word alive in this world, has the last word.** The Son also rises. The Son always rises. Amen. *

*Drawn from The Last Week by John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg and from Rev. Ron Luckey, Faith Lutheran Church Lexington, KY shared at the DART Annual Clergy Conference, February 3-5, 2016.

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