

Meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Palm/Passion Sunday, April 5, 2009, dedicated to the memory of Peter Mykrantz, to those who raise and harvest eco-palms, and always to the glory of God!

“Jesus and Moses”

Mark 11:1-11, Mark 15:1-21

**(Part VII of VIII in the sermon series
“Jesus Before and AFTER Christianity”)**

+++++

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.

+++++

In their book *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan tell of the last eight days of Jesus’ week in Jerusalem. They begin with today, Palm Sunday.

“Two processions entered Jerusalem on (this) Spring Day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year . . . One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession.

“From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, his followers were from the peasant class. They had journeyed to Jerusalem from Galilee, about 100 miles to the north, a journey that is the central

section and the central dynamic of Mark's Gospel. Mark's story of Jesus and the Kingdom of God has been aiming for Jerusalem, pointing toward Jerusalem. It has now arrived.

“On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea and Samaria entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial calvary and soldiers. Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions (on this day, 1,979 years ago) embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus' crucifixion.” (*The Last Week*, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 2006, p. 2).

The troops had come to reinforce the Roman garrison in preparation for Passover. Normally Pilate lived by the sea 60 miles away in Caesarea Maritima. It was more pleasant there and much less hostile than Jerusalem.

Pilate came to Fortress Antonia, overlooking the temple and court, to keep an eye on the Jews and to oversee the suppression of all insurrections. Passover is the Jewish celebration of liberation from slavery by Moses from Egypt. Clearly, Pilate had cause to be concerned about insurrections in a week when the liberating hope of Passover was in the hearts and minds of the Jewish people.

The sounds and actions of a liberating force were in the air that day entering from the east. But this force was no less than the power of God to heal, to bring peace, to transform lives through the message brought by the man of Nazareth. As Jesus entered Jerusalem, the people's cry shook the ramparts on the east gate: “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Jesus and his followers knew exactly what they were doing. They were staging a demonstration against the power of the empire. The symbolism of the Hebrew prophet Zechariah was clear: “A king would come to Jerusalem, humble and riding on a donkey.” (Zechariah 9:9)

He would be a king who, in the words of Zechariah “would cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the war-horse from Jerusalem. He would cut off the battle bow and command the nations in peace.” (9:10)

Jesus’ followers were proclaiming Jesus as the king of peace who would reign in coming kingdom of God. Military might would yield to the power of God. This peaceful procession from the east was about to confront the power, violence and glory of the empire that ruled the world and had its boot firmly on the neck of the Jews in Jerusalem and Judea.

The cost of discipleship in the kingdom of God is great. The week unfolding, which we call Holy Week, will show us that the call of discipleship means to lay down your life for others. From palms waving and shouts of “Hosanna,” we move to confrontation, to beatings and finally to Jesus’ death on a cross. I pray that we soak into our souls the purpose and the meaning of this story for our lives.

Which procession will we join? The one from the east gate or the one from the west gate? Which powerful ruler will we follow? Will we give ourselves to God and to one another? Will we lay our lives down for God and one another?

Listen carefully. Be touched. Be liberated. Be a follower of Jesus. This day, enter the east gate and proceed with him to Calvary. Amen.