

“Hosanna, Loud Hosanna”
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Luke 19:29-40

Palms or Passion? That’s the question worship planners ask as Holy Week begins. On this final Sunday in Lent, will we celebrate with a Parade, or bear witness to the suffering and death of Jesus?

A while back Eric saw the scripture reading we’ve just heard and wrote me an email saying something like, “Now that I see we’re doing Palms, I can choose an appropriate Anthem for the Choir.”

Good, I thought. Because we will raise our Hosannas on Palm Sunday, a welcome festival after long weeks of Lenten waiting. If we did not, the stones would have to take our place!

But we know what’s coming. It sneaks into our awareness if we accidentally read just a little further in Luke Chapter 19...

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.”

Then he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there; and he said, “It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer’; but you have made it a den of robbers.” Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.”

When Jesus enters Jerusalem, the die is cast. As Jesus weeps over the city, we remember the warning a while back of the Pharisees that Herod, the fox, wants to kill him and Jesus’ response in Galilee then that no matter, he yet has work to do, and prophets meet their end only in Jerusalem. And now he has entered its gates.

On purpose.

Biblical scholars Borg and Crossan say Jesus' entry on the donkey's colt was in intentional contrast and parallel to a nearly-simultaneous Roman imperial procession through another gate. They write:

On Sunday, Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem from the east in a procession riding on a donkey cheered by his followers.

At the same time, a Roman imperial procession of troops and cavalry entered the city from the west, headed by Pilate. Their purpose was to reinforce the Roman garrison stationed near the temple for the season of Passover, when... Jewish pilgrims filled the city.

Jesus's procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus's crucifixion.

Pilate's military procession was a demonstration of both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology. According to this theology, the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome, but the Son of God...

The contrast between Jesus' entry and the imperial entry sounds the central conflict that unfolds during the rest of the week. Jesus' mode of entry was symbolic, signifying that the kingdom of which he spoke was a kingdom of peace. According to the prophet Zechariah, the king entering Jerusalem on a donkey was to banish the weapons of war from the land and speak peace to the nations. The kingdom of Rome on the other hand was based on violence and the threat of violence.

There's no separating Palms and Passion. Because if Jesus is the One who Saves, the Son of David whose peaceful Kingdom God has established forever, then Pilate and the Rulers of this world are royal imposters, temporary pretenders to the throne.

Which brings us to the real challenging question of this day. Which procession will we join: Jesus's or Pilate's?

The one that leads to washing others' feet, or washing our hands?

To an empty Tomb? Or an elaborate palace?

To Jesus' Peace, or the Pax Romana?

We are forever making this choice, every day. What we are willing to notice about the world, to whom we extend compassion, where we direct our energies and other resources, how we speak and work and learn and consume. All the little choices that add up to the big choice of whom we worship.

And we can't really know which of our little choices might make a greater difference than we could imagine.

Philip Yancey tells the story of a brave decision made one day by an interpreter for the deaf named Natalia Dmitruk. In 2004, Victor Yushchenko challenged the incumbent party by campaigning to be president of Ukraine. He was countered at every turn, even violently some of us may remember, by the ruling party, which in the end tampered with the results and announced on state-run TV that Yushchenko had lost.

Natalia, translating the news silently in the bottom right hand corner of people's screens signed instead, "I'm addressing all the deaf citizens of Ukraine. They are lying and I'm ashamed to translate those lies. Yushchenko is our president."

The deaf community spread the word, journalists previously too afraid to report the truth began to do so, the nation forced a new election, and Victor Yushchenko became president.

Philip Yancey talks about Natalia Dmitruk's big-little Choice this way:

"...the image of a small screen of truth in the corner of the big screen became for me an ideal picture of the church. You see we as a church do not control the big screen. (When we do, we usually mess it up.) Go to any magazine rack or turn on the television and you see a consistent message. What matters is how beautiful you are, how much money or power you have. Similarly, though the world includes many poor people, they rarely make the magazine covers or the news shows. Instead we focus on the superrich, names like Bill Gates or Oprah Winfrey.... Our society is hardly unique. Throughout history nations have always glorified winners, not losers. Then, like the sign language translator in the lower right-hand corner of the screen, along comes a person named Jesus who says in effect, Don't believe the big screen – they're lying. It's the poor who are blessed, not the rich. Mourners are blessed too, as well as those who hunger and thirst, and the persecuted. Those who go through life thinking they're on top end up on the bottom. And those who go through life feeling they're on the bottom end up on the top. After all, what does it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose his soul?"

As we enter into this Holy Week, may we choose Jesus' Sacrifice and Resurrection, true Glory, over every lesser thing. Amen.

Sources:

Borg and Crossan, 2007

Philip Yancey, *What Good Is God*, pages 184-186

<https://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/choices/>

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nataliya_Dmytruk