

## ***“Who are you going to follow?”***

**April 17, 2011**

*Text: Isaiah 50:4-9a, Matthew 21:1-11*

### I.

Today—Palm Sunday—marks the beginning of *holy week*, the last week of Jesus’ life ...

With tension and uncertainty in the air, it’s a week filled with one dramatic event after another, a week moving, inexorably, towards the cross, towards the suffering and death that Jesus—in melancholic tones—has spoken of to the disciples. Three times he’s talked to them about it.

It all happens in Jerusalem, the *holy city*, the site of the Jewish Temple, the home of Jewish elites of all stripes, the center and focal point of power throughout Judaism.

By Jesus’ time, of course, this *center of Judaism* was very much mixed with Roman empire and the domination system it orchestrated and, when necessary, enforced.

### II.

In their book, ***The Last Week***, a book about Jesus’ final days in Jerusalem, scholars, **Marcus Borg** and **John Dominic Crossan**, write:

*Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year.*

They continue this imaginary historical glimpse by contrasting the two processions—hypothetical, of course.

1. One procession, entering from the east, is composed largely of peasants. At the center of this procession is Jesus—himself from the peasant village of Nazareth—riding on a donkey.
  - This procession is all about humility ...
  - It’s about compassion for the plight of the peasant class.
  - The message this procession of Jesus is proclaiming is about *the kingdom of God*—where love and compassion are the way and peace with justice is the outcome.
2. The second procession, coming into Jerusalem from the west, was an imperial procession headed by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.
  - Pilate entered with a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers.

- The message proclaimed by his procession was *the power of empire*.
- Pilate's military procession symbolized both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology.

As Borg and Crossan point out in their book, in many ways Palm Sunday, and the events of holy week that follow, all revolve around what is symbolized by these two, contrasting processions. The point being:

There's tension in the air ... conflict on the horizon. These two, contrasting worlds cannot long co-exist.

While we can easily get caught up in romanticizing Palm Sunday with our processions and our palm branches—which have their place and are, understandably, part of our celebration—still, the message Palm Sunday announces is a message of protest; protest against all that Judaism has become in its complicity with Roman empire.

To be more historically truthful to what really happened on Palm Sunday, rather than sing *All Glory, Laud and Honor* and *The King of Glory* (both of which we are singing this morning) we should probably be singing, *We Shall Overcome* and *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, the church's well known songs of protest and resistance.

### III.

What Palm Sunday really awakes in us is the call to make a decision. It challenges us to decide *who* we are.

***Who are you going to follow?*** We have to decide.

Of course, given the two alternatives that are presented around these two, contrasting processions, the question is rhetorical. With these choices, we know whom we're going to follow. We're with Jesus, a no brainer.

But in the day-in, day-out of our lives, ***Who are we going to follow?***

We have to make these decisions every day. These are polarizing times we're living in, times percolating with uncertainty.

1. To begin with, there's the economy and the challenge of job creation; and what are we going to do with entitlement programs, retirement and pension programs ... military spending—all huge challenges for which we need to find solutions.
2. And in education where we read, all the time, how America is falling behind other advanced nations around the world. And here in Florida ... with endless stories of the stresses around F-CAT testing ... something's not right.

Again, *Who are we going to follow?*

3. And with our tax system and the legitimate expectation that everyone pay a fair tax, something that we somehow don't seem to grasp as a nation.
  - Paying taxes is even biblical: *give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's*.
  - The key is that the tax system is fair, that it is just, that it is equitable; i.e., that everybody does their fair share.
4. And our commitment to clean energy ... and to the environment. With the recent oil spill in the Gulf and the nuclear melt down in Japan, we're reminded—more every day—that we have to take care of our planet. It's the only one we have. At what point do we look to our children's and our children's children's future with wisdom and humility and say *enough ... enough ...* and seek other sources of energy?
5. And with the ongoing debate on health care and the tough choices ahead on the future of Medicare and Medicaid.

These are complex issues and solutions are not easily arrived at. Nonetheless, we have to decide

*Who are we going to follow?*

#### IV.

No matter how we break it down, Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday is not a neutral event. Unmistakably, there's tension in the air. Listen to the gospel of **Matthew**:

*When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil. People were asking, Who is this? And the crowds kept saying, This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.*

No doubt, there was a lot of confusion about what this meant. Because it was the time of the Jewish Passover, thousands of visitors would have been in Jerusalem at this time ... and many who witnessed Jesus that day must have been struck by the symbolism: this prophet from Nazareth in Galilee, mounted on a donkey.

Some, perhaps, had heard of him. Others were perhaps learning about him on the spot. Certainly, masses of people—referred to in the scriptures as *the crowd*—were aware of the exclusionary injustices that prevailed, the corruption and the exploitation ... and looked on, in hope, for a better day.

History is full of stories of common folk ... people who have been beaten down by social injustices, to be sure; but other people as well, from diverse backgrounds ... people who care, who know that things aren't right and that there are changes that need to take place.

1. We've seen these uprisings of support for change through the years—with Nelson Mandela in South Africa, as the government-sponsored system of apartheid was dismantled and a new era of greater freedom and justice was ushered in.
2. We saw it in America, too, in one of the dramatic moments of the Civil Rights movement in the 60's when thousands of common folks, from diverse social, religious, ethnic and racial backgrounds, gathered in our nation's capital—
  - it was August 28, 1963—one of the most compelling moments in our nation's history ...
  - and people listened, ears riveted to the eloquent and poetic tones echoing through the microphone that day ...
  - as Martin Luther King, Jr. lifted our vision to the possibilities of a transcendent, more just day. **I have a dream**, he said.

*Who are we going to follow?*

V.

Palm Sunday, with all that it symbolizes, was a watershed moment for Jesus' followers and for many who gathered along the roadside that day ... amazed at what they were witnessing, wondering what it all meant.

Friends, is it any different for us today?

Palm Sunday invites us to get off the sidelines and join the procession.

- What kind of a world do we want to live in?
- How big a world?
- How welcoming and inclusive?
- How fair and just, how compassionate and merciful?

The symbolic sign of authenticity for any nation, any people—certainly any religion—is how they treat the most vulnerable among them. How they advocate and support *the little ones*, the ones who otherwise will be left out and discarded along the roadways of life's parades and processions.

*Who are we going to follow?*

VI.

As we are drawn into the challenge of this question, portions of **Psalm 118** lift our vision and deepen the passions of our faith ...

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.*

*Open to us the gates of righteousness, that we may enter through them.  
Give thanks to the Lord.*

*Join the festal procession with branches,  
Up to the horns of the altar, join it.*

*I thank you, Lord, that you have answered me  
And have, through Christ, become my salvation.*

*The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.  
This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.*

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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