

Palm Sunday April 9, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton
Matthew 21: 1-11

As you have heard me say, before, while we only hear about one procession on this day (which is the beginning of what was Passover week for Judaism) there were actually two: one, from the West, Pilate and Roman soldiers, watched warily, no doubt, by quite a few Jerusalem natives; and another from the East, Jesus and other Passover pilgrims. **So here's a contemporary question: I wonder who drew the bigger crowd?!!** Even without National Park Service pictures I can tell you the answer to that question: the Pilgrims from the east were by far the bigger crowd!

Those two processions make this day one of contrasts: From the West came a procession that – ever since Rome invaded this part of the Middle East – was always rich in symbolism.

The symbolism Rome intended, and presented, was one of violence and death. Here was a good chunk of the Roman 10th Legion's cavalry – the *Fretensis* Legion – from Caesar Maritima led by the Roman Governor of Judea Pontius Pilate – that's a military, not a civilian position. Everyone would have been in full battle armor – think the 1st SS Panzer division (called the “Adolf Hitler” division) which was responsible for any number of civilian massacres in Eastern Europe during World War II and you get a sense of how the cavalry of the 10th Legion was viewed by Jerusalem's locals. No one could miss the message: “mess with Rome and you'll get your own personal cross....” This is savage, heartless imperial power being flaunted.

Of course, there's a very good reason why Rome would want the locals to feel afraid: there may have been about 400 Roman soldiers with Pilate, facing perhaps 200,000 Jewish pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover Festival. What does that festival celebrate? Why it celebrates the freedom of an enslaved people by an empire – Moses and the Jews by Egypt! And they're celebrating that festival while being enslaved by another empire – Rome. If you were Rome, wouldn't you want to let the populace know that revolution against an empire is a really bad idea?!! Who cares if you crucify a few of the natives? It'll set a good example. Don't worry if they're guilty or innocent – in fact innocent is better – then no one can feel safe. But of course, if they're guilty, well, it's just that much easier.

The symbolism that Rome brought wasn't limited to a none-too-subtle reminder that “might always makes right,” it also represented a theological claim. They marched behind the Roman eagle, which symbolized the power of Rome and they marched behind the symbol of their own legion – a reminder of who founded them: Caesar Augustus. Of Caesar Augustus it was said that he was the Son of God, the “lord,” the “savior,” “the one who has brought peace on earth.” I wonder what might happen if someone else claimed those titles? Would Caesar and Rome stand passively by? Doubt it! So that's the Western procession.

From the East a large crowd of pilgrims, including Jesus and his disciples, would have been flowing over the top of the hill called the Mount of Olives, and down across the Kidron Valley toward Jerusalem – it was the beginning of the Passover Festival, after all – one of the three Holy Days that all male Jews were required to attend if they lived close enough to Jerusalem. For that

week, the population swelled five-fold.

And here was Jesus, riding an ass . Riding an ass was a symbol for the coming in peace of the true king who would “bring peace on earth.” So which one is the real king? Caesar or Jesus? That would have been the question of the day: For the peace of Jesus to come, Jesus was implying, Rome had to go. For the real Lord to take his rightful place, for the real Son of God to come into his fullness, the fake version had to go.

It’s not difficult to figure out that the other “Son of God” in Rome might object to having a rival! Would the legion founded by the first Emperor to call himself “son of God” let Jesus get away with the claim he was making? Hardly. Now you know how easy it would be to get crucified, if you take such provocative actions!

So today – Palm Sunday – is a challenging day. The god of war from the west, the Prince of Peace from the east.

No doubt Pilate wouldn’t have known Jesus from any other Jew on that first day. As the week went by – as our week goes by – we’ll hear more and more about why Pilate would have come to know who this mysterious out-of-towner was, and what he represented.

The remarkable thing about this day is that it’s timeless. The challenging encounter of these two extremes seems to repeat itself over and over again throughout human history.

Whether it’s Gandhi’s Salt March in 1930, or the Selma March over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965, or, the Tiananmen Square protests, and especially the “Tank Man” in 1989 – the struggle between the domination system and those oppressed by it is timeless.

I’ve wondered, over the years, if there’s any way to characterize these two extremes represented by Pilate and Jesus, and two words come to mind: fear, and hope. It almost goes without saying that the advent of the 10th Legion each year would have provoked fear; everyone knew that death marched in its vanguard. I think the other procession was marked by hope – the hope every pilgrim felt as Jerusalem came into view, and especially as each of them became aware of the man riding a donkey beside them.

For us there are a number of challenges. One is can we turn away from fear and toward hope? In our own time there are many voices seeking to make us fearful, not only of events elsewhere in our world, but also of those who might be standing beside us as we go about our daily lives. Fear is the soul-destroyer; fear disrupts trust, challenges hope, distances us from the love that our faith calls forth from us.

Hope is different. Our challenge with hope is not to have it – hope is one of those eternal qualities that every human being is imbued with. Rather, the challenge is to hold on to hope in the face of fear. This week is about that struggle. And at it’s core there’s a question for us about the procession of hope and the procession of fear, the procession of Pilate and of Jesus: “who’s procession are you in?” The one led by Pilate, or the one led by Jesus?

