

Palm Sunday, March 20, 2016. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Luke 19:28-40

Did you know that President Obama's on his way to Cuba? Pretty significant trip, though not much is going to happen other than a "meet-and-greet" – lots of good "photo ops," smiles, handshaking. Not much is going to happen other than this because the substantive actions – like lifting the U.S. trade embargo on Cuba – is outside of President Obama's control. So this trip is almost pure political theater – in one meaning of that phrase, anyway! One definition of political theater is "any action by politicians that is intended to make a point rather than accomplish something substantive."

Another definition of political theater is this: "political action or protest that has a theatrical quality to it." So, for instance, when the "Black Lives Matter" folk shut down Bernie Sanders in Seattle last August, or the Anti-Donald Trump folk disrupted that planned Chicago event a week or so ago, well, that's "political theater."

And the third definition of political theater is this: "theater that comments on political issues." For example, King Lear, or Macbeth are both examples of political theater – plays that explore deeper political issues that cut to the heart of the way human beings interact when they struggle for power.

The thing about political theater is that it has an impact way beyond the immediate circumstances of its enactment. The truth is that some political theater goes by almost unnoticed at the time and it is only later, when the complex jigsaw of human events has finally been slotted together, that the true impact of the original is felt.

Today, Palm Sunday – as described in the gospels – fits all three of those definitions, and was certainly an event whose true impact wasn't felt immediately, which probably explains why it is, for us, one of the most powerful parts of the story of Jesus' life and death.

The gospels present what we now call "The Triumphal Entry" in a way that's pure theater – events re-enacted, actions implied, words carefully chosen, all to make a series of political points that – had it been done using modern communications– would have set off alarm bells at the heart of the world's empires.

Thing is, they didn't have modern communications. Were it not for the gospels, we certainly wouldn't know about the Palm Sunday events today, and, in truth, it's very unlikely that anyone outside of those present in Jerusalem that week knew much about it either.

Still, the implications wouldn't have been lost on those who saw it – all Jews, most likely, though not all fond of Jesus. After all, when you mess with politics – like religion – you're likely to provoke strong emotions.

In this case – with a full battalion of heavily armed soldiers entering Jerusalem from the west led by Pontius Pilate on a war horse – the symbolism of a Jew entering Jerusalem from the east

unarmed and riding a donkey (the symbolism meaning here comes the king, in peace) – would not be lost on all the other Jews who longed for freedom from the oppressive Roman yoke.

Each form of political theater is dangerous to its participants. It's not difficult to figure out that if you bring all the forms together in one event then there'll likely be trouble!

If there had been posters up in Jerusalem during that Passover week you can imagine what they might have said: "the Prince of Peace vs. the Prince of War – time to choose!"

But there wouldn't have been posters up in Jerusalem – Empires don't like it when they're challenged, and most of the time in human history they have responded violently.

All the pieces are in play, and even if we didn't know how the story of Jesus and Pilate and the Great Passover Confrontation turned out, it wouldn't be hard to predict: only one of the two was going to end up on a cross, and it certainly wouldn't be Pilate.

And yet. And yet it could have turned out differently. There were, after all, only about 800 Roman soldiers in Jerusalem, and maybe one hundred thousand pilgrims. While the violence of Pilate's actions makes complete sense if you want to cow a population, a crowd of 100,000 could easily overpower those Romans, even though they were the ones with the swords.

So something else was at play here, too. Pilate's actions at the end of the Passover Week couldn't have happened if there hadn't been some form of collusion with the powerful elites who still controlled the institutions of the occupied state. That collusion wasn't in any way racial, but a collusion determined by greed, arrogance, self-centeredness, and an innate belief in one's own superiority over others; those are timeless human characteristics, and certainly not ones of which we can be particularly proud.

How could it have been different? There's an old Cherokee proverb that Dick Hall reminded me of last week that offers some wisdom: *One evening a grandfather told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, "My son, the battle is between two "wolves" inside us all. One is Evil. It is anger, greed, arrogance, self-pity, resentment, superiority . . . The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, kindness, compassion and faith . . . The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: "Which wolf wins?" The grandfather simply replied, "The one you feed."*

Jesus is still riding down the Mount of Olives into the Jerusalems of our own day; he still challenges the view that Might is Right, that it's okay for the few to control the many, that the human values of love and hope, kindness, compassion and faith aren't the most important values we can hold to.

Whether he is again crucified on the cross of human anger, greed, arrogance, self-pity, resentment, and superiority is down to every one of us, down to our choice of which wolf we will feed. That's a question for all of us, this Holy Week; perhaps it's The Question.