

Palm Sunday, March 25, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Isaiah 50:4-9a, Philippians 2:5-11, Mark 11: 1-11

Palm Sunday is a challenging holy day in the life of all Christians, and especially when we come together in worship. It is, after all, the entry point to Holy Week, and as such, it's the beginning of an emotional and political roller coaster. "Emotional" is obvious; "political" not so much, until you look a little deeper.

As a way in, I want to ask you a question: did you see the crowds yesterday on the news – thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions?! A huge crowd, flowing together from all over, heading for one place, with one central purpose. The "March for our Lives" was truly remarkable, happening all over the country, but focused on one place: Washington D.C. – because that's where you go when you want to make a point that you hope those in power will hear. That's the place to demonstrate – and sometimes, that's the place where civil disobedience has its greatest effect, especially if it's peaceful. That's how you do political theater.

There was another purpose yesterday as well – to energize like-minded people, get more people involved, build a movement. Maybe it's the beginning of something. Or actually, maybe it's the next step on a journey that started sometime ago, that's been simmering, getting closer to the boil.

"A huge crowd, flowing together from all over, heading for one place, with one central purpose. Because that's where you go when you want to make a point that you hope those in power will hear. That's the place to demonstrate – and sometimes, that's the place where civil disobedience has its greatest effect, especially if it's peaceful. That's how you do political theater." For a 1st Century Jew, that place was Jerusalem, and the Temple.

The Day of Palms we're recalling right now was a day of religious march for sure – the Pilgrims' journey toward Passover comes almost to its end on the hillside outside the Holy City.

But under Roman occupation it was also and always a political procession too, because Passover was (and remains) about celebrating the freeing of those oppressed by a foreign empire – the Empire of Egypt. In that story, that empire's leader and his army perished. For the Roman army of occupation, that story would be the most obvious of metaphors for what all Jews hoped for; that story would have enormous contemporary power and threat. **And threat.** So Rome did what all empires do: have an overwhelming display of military force – soldiers in full battle armor, ready to seize any trouble-makers from the crowd and drag them away; hoping that some idiot would put a foot out of line and then they could crucify him. That's a scene that's still played out at political demonstrations today, isn't it? Though not, perhaps, with quite so terminal a result.

That Palm Sunday, so long ago – it's not so different than yesterday. It didn't matter that the political class in 1st Century Judea absented themselves from Jerusalem; that Caesarea Maritima on the coast suddenly became so much more attractive! Word would get back – Jesus made sure of that. Riding a donkey through the King's Gate was a provocative, political act, a counter-argument: might is not right; using violence to achieve an end is a sign of weakness, not of

strength, and those who resort to it will be consigned to the landfills of history – who remembers who was emperor when Jesus was crucified? Or even (if you can name him? It was Tiberius) what he was known for (he was a great general but was known primarily as the “gloomiest of men” – Pliny the Elder)?

It didn't matter that the political class absented themselves from Washington D.C. yesterday - word has already gotten back!

And what was that “word”? We want peace! We want an end to violence perpetrated on innocents by those who misuse weapons of war. We want an end to the silencing of victims by those with the power to do so. We want freedom from systems of oppression.

Those “words” that got back from the 1st and 21st centuries – they're not that different. And it's still true that those who speak them risk a violent response, either from those who they challenge, or from others who act as proxies, who feel that their way of life is threatened by these upstarts.

We don't always make this sort of connection between centuries because of the theology of the Medieval Church, which described Jesus as the “paschal victim” in its hymns and prayers and theological books. The problem with that view is that it unfairly and inaccurately robs Jesus of his agency – of his capacity to act independently and to make his own free choices. If the agony of Gethsemane means anything it is that Jesus chose to act in this way, knowing the likely consequences. No one forced him to do this; he wasn't powerless but powerful, as John's gospel reports, where Jesus tells Pilate: “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above” (19:11). No, Jesus' story is in part about how he chose to exercise his power.

The disciples, too, had agency, had power, had freedom to choose. As I said last week, they didn't particularly want to go with Jesus to Jerusalem, because they'd figured out what was likely to happen, but they went anyway – they exercised their agency and chose to go.

Why did Jesus do what he did? Why did the disciples do that? Because of the driving force of love, the true love that drives out fear, the true love that supported his commitment to that real change that only comes “when justice roll[s] down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:24)

Most of the folk marching in Washington D.C. – and all across our country – are also not acting as victims either. They saw the “signs of the times” and decided that it was their responsibility to act – they exercised their agency and chose to go because, I believe of that love which seeks justice and righteousness. Love for each other, for those who are living in fear, for our nation.

There's another similarity here, too. A clear-eyed recognition of the ambiguity of these two different days. The crowds celebrate the moment, and also recognize that in the challenge they are issuing to those in power they are taking a risk. What will happen when the going gets tough?

On both days I think it's safe to say that political and religious leaders are scheming, and the possibility of legal action and condemnation is on the horizon.

Can we all – each in our own set of challenges – commit ourselves fully to God’s way, especially in times of conflict? Or will we become, in Thomas Merton’s words, “guilty bystanders?” Perhaps we can learn today from what Jesus believed his mission was, that Palm Sunday: it wasn’t to “throw the rascals out” and install a new political and religious order; it was to transform that order in its entirety.

It’s one thing to work for a “transformed economic, immigration, environmental, and foreign policy,” but it can’t be at the expense of throwing anyone under the bus. Involvement seeking change doesn’t mean using tactics that deny our core values of inclusion: **it’s about transformation, not about winners and losers.**

Jesus had strong beliefs and five days after Palm Sunday they took him to the cross, but even then he refused to be entangled in political partisanship or polarization. God’s way must embrace celebrants and mourners, liberals and conservatives, quietists and activists. We don’t need to emulate media and political polarization and vilifying of opponents to promote God’s realm.

Perhaps, on this day, that’s the most important learning: we have to do it together, even if, like then, it means doing so will require us to experience the full roller coaster of life; even if it means embracing the interplay of joy and sorrow, of struggle and challenge. Because that’s the only way in which we will also discover the divine possibility of healing and reconciliation in the chaos of our own ambiguous lives. We have agency. We can choose. Will we?