

“The Things That Make For Peace”

We gather together this morning on Palm Sunday to celebrate the triumphal entry of the Lord into the city of Jerusalem, a city whose name in Hebrew literally means “Seeing of Peace.” This morning we celebrate with songs of praise, with a litany of confession, lament, and hopeful expectation, the triumphal entry of the One whose lordship cannot be understood or recognized according to the “peace” and “glory” that defines and characterizes the centers of power in our world. We celebrate the One who, as Paul put it, “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5-8). This morning we gather to celebrate the entry of the one whose ride to glory is a humble donkey, and whose lordship is revealed as much with the cross of Good Friday as with the jubilee of Easter Sunday. The triumphal entry of Palm Sunday pushes us into the space of Holy Week in which the One who proclaimed freedom for the oppressed, and embodied the things that make for peace in his body and in his message, is crucified by the powers of the world.

All four Gospels tell of Jesus’s entry into the city of Jerusalem from the region around Bethany and the Mount of Olives. The accounts of the other three Gospels show remarkable similarity to Luke as they narrate the events leading up to Jesus’s death, except on one point: in Luke’s Gospel there are no palm branches. And this seems intentional. When reading Luke’s account, one gets the impression that arrangements have already been made for Jesus to enter the city in a particular way. Jesus sends his disciples out ahead of him, providing them with a set of instructions. The disciples are to find a young unriden donkey. As an animal that has never been ridden, the donkey symbolizes that it is for sacred use. A donkey, however, is hardly an animal for a royal ceremony. It is a draft animal -- humble, common, and singularly unimposing. Think about it: one would never ride a donkey into war, at least not if one was expecting to win. And that, it would seem, is precisely the point: this little donkey carries a king on her back that comes not as a warrior in imperial military garb but in the way of peace, as a humble servant, gathering a ragtag group along with him. The symbolism of the donkey is a clear allusion to the Book of Zechariah: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” A king who comes on a donkey. The absurdity of this image should not go unnoticed; it tells us a great deal about the kind of God with whom we are confronted in the person of Jesus. Perhaps if we were to think of it happening today, it’d be like Jesus pulling up in an old beater, maybe an old, rusted out Ford escort or something. I imagine the annoying sounds of a braying donkey or the sounds and smells from the exhaust of an old, rusted out muffler.

In contrast to the other Gospel accounts of this story, there are no crowds waving palm branches, nor are there crowds shouting hosannas as one might find, say, among a crowd greeting a war hero preparing or returning from battle. Instead, in the scene that Luke provides we see Jesus with ordinary people, poor and disinherited people, who come near to cushion Jesus’s ride with the clothing from their own backs, divesting themselves of symbols of any status or prestige or privilege that they may have held. In this scene, there are no trappings of war or preparing for war. The disciples direct their praises to God for all the “deeds of power” that they have already witnessed (19:37). Now the city will, indeed, see and behold their Lord, but they will behold his

presence as One who bears within himself a peace that they do not recognize and cannot conceive, for his peace is now more sharply opposed to the “peace” of the city than ever before. The disciples sing out, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” Peace is that gift which comes from heaven, from the God who cannot be understood or recognized apart from the particular form that he takes in human flesh, apart from the One whose lordship is to be seen *not* in ceremonial and royal prestige, but on the backside of a donkey, divested of any claim to earthly power backed by force and to the securing of peace by way of war and preparation for war.

Alarmed by the singing of the disciples, the Pharisees in the crowd tell Jesus to order his disciples to stop. He answers, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” We must not overlook the depth of meaning which is to be found in this passage. The peace of Christ creates its own witnesses. Even if the disciples are stopped or silenced by the powers of the world, the stones themselves will shout out praises to God! Listen, God will not be without witnesses! The presence of heavenly peace embodied in Jesus’ life ministry may always go unrecognized by the centers of power of the world and even by the gathered church, but rest assured that Christ will never be without witnesses, for Christ’s power and presence and lordship are so explosive that, even without human witnesses, the stones will cry out and stand as witnesses of God’s glory and truth and love. In this way, God’s peace is uncontainable. No earthly power, no religious authority, no Empire can keep the Spirit of the living God from creating witnesses in the world.

So, too, in our own day, we are called not to live our lives out of a sense of anxiety, despairing over the lack of witnesses to the truth. It is not quite right to think as we sometimes are prone to do that we are the hands and feet of Christ. It is not quite right to think that without us God remains powerless in heaven. Such an idea may give us a sense of urgency regarding the tasks and work before us, but this is not finally the Gospel message; it is God alone who creates witnesses; and it is God’s refusal to be silent in our world that makes possible “the things that make for peace,” which at its foundation remains the gift of freedom and liberation for the oppressed and a comprehensive justice rooted in truth and love. Today, we stand as the disciples did long ago with the promise of the presence of the same Spirit at work in our midst, and with songs of praise we are never left empty-handed. God is at work through the power of the Spirit, even now, in our midst, creating witnesses to the “things that make for peace” -- so that even the stones cry out to bear witness. We must trust that the Spirit is at work in each and every one of us, each in our own way and in our own time, to transform us from silence and timidity into living witnesses, in our words and in actions, to the peace of God embodied in Jesus Christ. So, too, we must trust that the Holy Spirit creates witnesses to the “things that make for peace” inside and outside the walls of the church--we see this today with the Movement for Black Lives, with the Water Protectors at Standing Rock and across this land, the Spirit is at work whenever the enemy is welcomed as beloved by God, whenever the stranger is welcomed as friend, whenever the foreigner is welcomed as neighbor, whenever the immigrant and refugee is welcomed as having a place and a home. Because our God will not be without witnesses, we can even expect the Spirit to be at work outside the walls of church.

We move now to what I take to be the heart of today’s Palm Sunday narrative, where we see Jesus coming near to the city and beginning to weep. We see here a scene of lament and grief over impending events. On the one hand, the crucifixion, Good Friday, is anticipated here; Jesus is already grieving over Jerusalem’s rejection of him. Jesus says, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!” On the other hand, writing his Gospel decades after these events, and with the later destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE in view, we can read this as Luke’s own lament and grief over the violence of rebellion and the destruction of the city and great Temple of God. And so Luke has Jesus prophesying about the imminent destruction of Jerusalem: “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 with you.” The city of Jerusalem does not recognize its own name, “Seeing of Peace” and does not recognize their “visitation from God.” There is a tone of judgment here but it is expressed in the form of lament. It is a judgment that comes as almost too deep for words; it is judgment in the form of mourning, judgment in the form of weeping. In their refusal of the peace embodied in Jesus, the peace that comes from heaven and made manifest not according to the powers of the world but on the back of a donkey, for Luke, Jerusalem had sown the seeds of its own destruction. The tone is not, however, one of gloating or prideful glee, it is one of frustration and grief. You, the great holy city of God, the city of Jerusalem, the city of the Temple, the city of peace, you do not recognize the things that make for peace!

Jesus’ weeping, his lament over the city focuses attention on the Temple. The leaders of the Temple had chosen accommodation and compromise with the occupying Roman Empire. They had chosen a false peace. They had chosen the path of least resistance, but at a great cost to the majority of ordinary Jews. They had chosen economic security derived from worship in the Temple. And Jesus strongly rebukes them for having turned a house of prayer into a den of robbers. Luke indicates that they plotted to kill the One who lived the way of peace; this signals to the fact that any disturbance of the established order was perceived as a threat to their own position of power. While they may have loved Israel deeply, they loved their own security more, and so Jesus grieves that they could not recognize the “things that make for peace.” They could not recognize that the peace of the city emerges not from “on high” in sacred and holy places or in royal palaces, but among the humble and poor and the disinherited of the earth. Listen to the preaching of this king who rides in glory on the back of a donkey: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God!” Listen to the preaching of this king who does not regard equality with God as something to be exploited: “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled!” Listen to the preaching of this king who promises to bring laughter to those who weep: “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh!”

The peace of the Gospel does not accommodate to the violent structures of the world. Instead, this peace combined with justice emerges only from an attentiveness to the cries of the disinherited of the earth, those who struggle for freedom. It is here and here alone that we can hear the weeping of Jesus today. The Temple leaders guarded against any all forms of revolution and radicalism. They worried that rebellion would cause the relative peace they had made with Rome topple over and so they worried that everything would be lost. But Jesus wept. He wept out of his deep love for his people and for the world. He wept because those who spoke of peace did not recognize that the very peace of God was in their midst.

As long as we imagine peace as the balancing act of opposing powers, as did the Pharisees and Sadducees each in their own way, as long we imagine peace as merely the absence of violence and war, and peace as the maintenance of the status quo, we cannot and will not recognize the peace that comes from heaven. This peace runs deeper than the peace secured by the Department of Homeland Security and the peace promised to us in violent rebellion. Yet, this peace is not rightly understood as a “middle” or “third way.” It is rather a peace that moves from below disrupting the status quo, disrupting the middle, and is always in service to justice for the disinherited of the earth, those barred from recognition by the powers.

The question that we face today is whether we too have failed to recognize “the things that make for peace.” Can we recognize Christ before us? Can we recognize Christ in our midst? Or, do we, too, find it easier to accommodate to the given structures of the world that sustain a false peace? Does Jesus weep over our city and our churches that have become invested more in security than in justice and the things that make for peace? Can we hear the lament of Jesus? Can we hear his weeping? Be ready; for our God *will* create witnesses.

