

Ten weeks ago I had the extraordinary good fortune to stand in the Palm Sunday Church in *Beth Phagee*—“house of the little fig.” Today an ecumenical procession of pilgrims has already made its way from that Church to the Mount of Olives, and from there into the old city of Jerusalem, amid shouts of “hosanna.” It is something else to walk in those places; and very cool. Even so, we don’t have to travel halfway around the world, nor two thousand years back in time, to enter into the deep mystery of this day’s events. Our liturgy today seeks to replicate that same drama in order to bring us closer and to make the story more real. Our goal is not only to better understand what *happened* a long time ago, but what *is happening* in the world in which we live, for we believe that this is God’s world and that the story of God’s love for the world continues to unfold even now.

And so we walked with our palms today and shouted hosanna. As this week unfolds we will again walk on Friday “the way of the Cross” until we gather again next Sunday at the empty tomb, because we believe that this is the path to abundant life. Our prayer is that as we recall the Story we will see it reflected in our own lives, so that we might find courage and hope in the midst of life’s struggles and travails. The week that lies ahead is nothing less than an invitation to allow this Story to shape and transform us above all else: our failures and our successes, our gender or ethnic identities, the realities of birth order and family life, whether we were parented well or not. Wherever we are in our pilgrimage, today marks a new beginning and an invitation to take another step toward becoming God’s Easter people.

So the story begins in Beth-Phagee, where Jesus and his disciples have finally arrived after having left Galilee and the Mount of the Transfiguration to make their way to Jerusalem. Even as we made our way today from Beth-Phagee (a.k.a. the Memorial Garden) to “the city gates” of Jerusalem (a.k.a. the doors of this nave), some scholars argue that another parade was happening across town at the other end of the holy city. That parade was a display of Roman imperial power, as Pontius Pilate rode into the city with horse and chariot and shining armor and the brass bands played Sousa marches. The Romans are worried that in the holy season when pilgrims came from all over the land to the Temple to remember that old, old story of the Exodus that a riot might break out; and so they are showing their force to try to make sure no one gets any silly ideas.

The central religious event of this week, before it came to be known to us as Holy Week, is centered on that Exodus story. Now it is possible to *spiritualize* the Exodus narrative to the point where it no longer has any relevance to the “real” world, and that would have suited Caesar just fine. As long as the Exodus story can be confined to the distant past—remembered only as something that happened “once upon a time”—then it is of little concern to Pilate or his superiors in Rome. If it’s just a nice little story the Jews remember with a Seder meal, who cares? But the point of the story is that it isn’t meant to be confined to Sabbath prayers: it’s a story about God’s work in the world, a story about the move from slavery to freedom, a story meant to inspire both hope and action. The old story of the Exodus that is remembered every Passover tells of how God was with a tiny band of slaves to lead them out of the bondage of Egyptian imperial power by tossing horse and rider into the sea. Now if the Jews who are gathered in Jerusalem begin to connect the dots and see how similar Roman imperial power is to Egyptian imperial power that might lead to an insurrection. Of course the normal response of imperial power, when it feels threatened, is to instill fear. If you have all the power then you make sure people stay very afraid. So maybe that is what that parade on the other side of town is all about: intimidation.

What then, about our little parade from Beth-Phagee to Jerusalem? What exactly is Jesus up to? Is this a protest march? Is he mocking them by acting out a parable to remind his disciples and anyone with eyes to see that all imperial power is temporal and that all empires will come to an end? Jesus certainly draws

on Old Testament language from Zechariah 9 and Psalm 118: in the context of this Passover festival he seems to be suggesting that God is about to do a new thing. *Hosanna, Son of David*, the people cry, remembering that David was king over Israel and Jerusalem was his capital city and that the Messiah is supposed to come into the city to bring about regime change.

The Gospels tend to give Pilate a bit of a free pass. Most scholars think this is because when they were finally written down, the last thing that the early Christian community wanted was a full-frontal assault against Rome. By the time the gospels are written down, the Temple has been destroyed by the Roman authorities because of a Jewish insurrection. Rome responds with the military might at its disposal. So even though we will hear today in Luke's Passion Narrative that Pilate just wants to flog Jesus and then let him go, we need to hear that with critical and discerning ears. In Matthew's Gospel, we get that famous image of Pilate washing his hands. The suggestion seems to be that this was all the fault of the Jewish Temple; that they forced Pilate into this. But almost certainly that isn't how it went down. Almost certainly, Pilate took care of business in the way that imperial power always does, by letting someone else do his dirty work. He wanted, and got, "plausible deniability" that allowed him to publicly wash his hands of the whole mess. But don't be fooled, as the people of Jesus own day and the early Christians certainly were not fooled. They knew that Pilate was not a good man who lacked the courage to stand up to the Temple authorities, but a grand manipulator who has plenty of blood on his hands.

What this day is really about, I think, is a clash of kingdoms: will it be Caesar or Christ? Will it be the *Pax Romana*, a peace that is at best an absence of war, or the *Pax Christi*, the peace of God that passes all understanding? You can't sit this one out! You can't sit in the middle of Jerusalem to wait and see what happens. Who is Lord over your life and mine? These two very different cultures: the love of power verses the power of love. By Friday we'll see how it all turns out. Or at least we will see what always seems to happen: the forces of evil will align to destroy Jesus and try to silence him. When people get out of line that is what you do: you stir up an angry mob to have them killed, or you disappear them. End of story. It turns out, however, that the best they can do is kill him and that that is *not* the end of the story. Friday's sorrow gives way to Saturday waiting, which ultimately yields to Sunday's surprising joy. You and I know that there is more to come for we are Easter people.

In our own day, separating church and state doesn't mean that religion is only about spiritual matters. We do well on this day to remember that the gospel of Jesus Christ has profound implications for our political and economic choices, even as we also remember that claiming Jesus as Lord transcends and critiques all of our political loyalties and ideologies. As Jim Wallis has said, God isn't a Democrat or a Republican. But when we say, not just today but every week when we gather to break the bread: *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord* we are declaring our allegiance to Christ; we are making a political claim. We need to remember that this "Son of David" is ultimately claimed as "king of kings and lord of lords." We pledge allegiance to Christ, above all other claims for authority over our lives. *All* others.

As we once more walk this journey of Holy Week, and in particular the three holy days of this coming week, we are not going back in time. We are being re-membered, re-formed, re-newed by the Paschal Mystery. We are being taken once more to the very heart of our faith and the affirmation and insistence that death does not get the last word. Not this time.

One week from today we will gather here again to celebrate, and then to be sent back out into the world to share the good news that truth is stronger than lies, and hope is stronger than fear, and love is stronger than hate. The good news that through Jesus Christ, sin and death are conquered, and Christ's victory over death makes it possible for you and me and the whole world to have life, and to have it more abundantly.