

Where's Your High Horse? (Palm Sunday Sermon)
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
April 14, 2019

Matthew 21:1-17

If the children playing out on the street that day were here with us now, they would tell the story of two parades in Jerusalem that Passover.

The first parade entered Jerusalem victorious from the west, led by a ruthless ruler who had just conquered another territory. The children jumped up on large stones that lined the route, craning their necks to see the flashy armor and shiny swords. Chariots, helmets, spears, the whole deal ... this parade was about spectacle. Finally, almost at the end of the procession rode Pontius Pilate, seated high upon a gleaming white stallion, perfectly groomed with a shiny sheen for all to admire.

This moment was all about intimidation and control. You see, the Romans wanted to keep the Jews of Jerusalem under their thumb. Passover, after all, was a reminder of the time when God saved the Israelites from oppression and slavery. The Romans who held all the power didn't want the Jews to get any funny ideas about freedom (we all know what a contagious idea *that is!*).

What better way to remind them of their place than to parade into the entrance of their Holy City, displaying Rome's strength after another colonial victory?

The second parade entered Jerusalem from the east, from the direction of the Mount of Olives. The man who led it conquered no territory, secured no military victories.

There were no warriors at his side, just a bedraggled-looking group of supporters: children, women, men, tax collectors, prostitutes, and others called sinners. The man in front was riding a colt, which looked kind of funny! Seeing his feet drag on the ground, it made the children laugh. And when he heard them, he smiled. "Where's your high horse?" a young man shouted from the sidelines.

This second man had done many great things, maybe that's why the crowds were calling him "blessed" as they threw their coats down in celebration and waved tall leafy palm fronds.

They had heard many stories.

Stories of him curing a man with an unclean spirit.

Stories of him healing a woman with a high fever, a leper and a paralytic.

Stories of him saying that "*blessed are the poor, the hungry, and those who weep.*"

Stories of him preaching love for their enemies.

They had heard stories he had told, passed through the grapevine.

They even heard one about him feeding five thousand plus people with nothing more than a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish.

The people in the crowd that day wanted peace and they wanted someone to win it for them because they could not do so without help.

They wanted this man to overthrow the Romans, but it was yet to be seen whether or not he would do so in the fashion they expected.

Few things make us madder than someone we lifted up as a hero but who later refused to save us, at least the way we want to be saved. Perhaps that's why some of them will turn on him later.

The name of this second man was Jesus of Nazareth.

These two men - Pilate and Jesus - are bound to collide, like two tectonic plates. They were stirring the pot, each in their own way;

Pilate, by asserting supreme Roman authority,
and Jesus, by challenging it.

The Pharisees could see it coming, that's why they implored Jesus to silence his followers. The temple leadership tried to play nice with the Romans and they knew that this display would only attract their negative attention.

Some followed Jesus into the city because he brought them out of despair and into hope, they were grateful and energized! But others were scared to death at the rumors of what he had been teaching those who joined his odd parade.

"Blessed are the meek," he said, "for they shall inherit the earth."

No, that is crazy... we know the powerful and mighty always-always-always win.

"You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'"

What sort of madness is this? How are we to pray for THOSE people?

"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink."

Come on. You have got to be kidding. Who can really live that way?

"For what will it profit you to gain the whole world but forfeit your life?"

Well, thinking like that will never get the economy moving again.

"Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant..."

Forget it, we're standing tall and we will be greater still.

So as if to prove it to them, he went.

First, to the Temple, the very epicenter of religious power. There he overturned the tables of those who would take advantage of the poor. He challenged their piety by healing and welcoming the excluded and marginalized. There in the holiest place he knew, he had the courage to stir things up, knowing it would seal his fate.

Later on, Jesus invited his friends to the table in an upper room, breaking bread with them. There he got on his knees and washed the feet of his disciples, an act that would be laughable to think of Pontius Pilate doing. There he told his disciples about a new commandment, more powerful than any law the Romans could ever pronounce, a command to love one another just as Jesus had loved them. Moments later, his heart broke from despair, for love of Judas, the one who let greed and betrayal get the upper hand.

Then it was on to the Garden of Gethsemane, for a sleepless night of anguish. There he met the guards who would take him away for questioning. And when one of his followers cut off one of the guard's ears, he continued his quest of love again, and healed that man.

Then it was on to Herod's palace, where an innocent man was sentenced to death for no reason other than his inconvenient gospel of love. There Jesus would be beaten and made to carry the very cross upon which he would later hang. On the hill of Golgotha, he'd cry out to God to forgive the very people who were crucifying him. The onlookers would tell us that he took his final breath and died.

And if the stone that sealed the tomb that day could speak, it would tell us of Jesus' lifeless body lying cold in that dark stone cavern. But if we stick around long enough, that same stone might just tell us a different story one week from today.

Living this peculiar, God-shaped life Jesus knew he would not escape suffering. He talked about it along the way, telling his confused disciples not once but three times what would happen next. Yet, still he rode into the city, drawn there by the heart of God. And he comes riding still.

For most of us, the battle between our worst selves and our best selves is not waged on large public platforms.

It does not impact global issues, or affect millions of people.

But, as we each face our own temptations and demons and overcome them by the grace and love of God, so we make the world a better place for ourselves and those whose lives we do touch – our families, friends, coworkers and neighbors.

I am quite certain that when we stand face to face with God in eternity, God will acknowledge that joining Jesus on this parade was not an easy route.

Because the God we meet in Jesus is never a spectator standing at a distance.

I guess we should have remembered that from the very beginning of Matthew's Gospel. Even before Jesus was born, the angel whispered to Joseph in a dream, "*You shall call his name Immanuel, which means God with us.*"

Who is this? This is Immanuel, God with us. God with us in the broken places. God with us in the spaces filled with fear. God with us in the very heart of suffering. There, on another hillside, Jesus, Immanuel, turns to his disciples and to us wherever we are today: "*Remember,*" Jesus says, "*I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*" Even now. Amen.