Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Palm/Passion Sunday

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HOSANNA Mark 11:1–11

Mark’s account of the “triumphal” entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is not only filled with misunderstanding and irony; it is also misnamed. Mark reports that it was only after the procession that Jesus entered the old walled City of Jerusalem.

Chad Myers in his commentary says that the whole episode resembles “carefully choreographed street theater.” The story is carefully designed to give intentionally conflicting signals. It sets up a contrast between two interpretations, and as it turns out, only one interpretation will prove to be true. In the meanwhile, we, the witnesses to the scene, are caught up in the irony of it all.

On the one hand, the procession can be seen in light of a military procession of a triumphal nationalist hero, as when the triumphal rebel Simon Maccabaeus entered into Jerusalem 160 years earlier to defend the city and its Jewish residents against their enemies. It is reported that Simon Maccabaeus entered the city “with praise and palm branches and with hymns and psalms.” (1 MC 13:52) That event is echoed in the Jesus’s procession towards the city.

Mark, to re-enforce this particular interpretation, has the march of Jesus begin near “the Mount of Olives.” In the tradition of the end times found in the Hebrew Scriptures, the final battle against the enemies of Israel in defense of Jerusalem was associated with the Mount of Olives. In Zechariah we read:

I [God] will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle,

and the city shall be taken and the houses plundered . . . Then

will God go forth and fight against those nations as when he

fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet shall stand on the

Mount of Olives. —Zechariah 14:2–4

Is Mark, then, implying that Jesus is going forth to battle? Or, is the message quite different?

Let us now turn to the second interpretation of our story. Let us recognize that over half of the story involves the procurement not of a great horse, the kind of animal upon which Simon Maccabaeus rode, but a young colt. Here, Mark seems to be pointing to quite a different tradition also found in the prophet Zechariah, that of a Messiah who comes into Jerusalem, “triumphant and victorious” on the one hand, but also “humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” (Zechariah 9:9)

So we have two possibilities: the first, the procession of a great hero riding on a mighty horse bent upon a violent battle against the enemies of Israel; and the second, the procession of an anti-military (John Bolton, take note), non-violent, humble, servant Messiah. The goal of the first kind of entry into Jerusalem would be the establishment of a Jewish state centered in the temple. It would require a conquering hero to enter the temple, therefore, in triumph to the acclaim of all. The goal of the second kind of entry into Jerusalem at this point in the story is unknown. In hindsight, we know that it did not lead to an enthronement or the establishment of a temple state. No, it led to a cross. At the end of our story, we get a hint. After the procession, Jesus does enter Jerusalem, and goes into the temple. And what does he do? He just looks around and leaves. There is no triumphal entry here.

The scene of the procession of Jesus to the outskirts of the old walled city of Jerusalem is, in itself, ambiguous, and filled with irony. At first glance, we can see it both ways. We can easily get it wrong. Even the shout “Hosanna” is ambiguous. In ancient Jewish tradition it was used to address kings as in an acclamation, such as “hail to the chief.” But it was also used as a cry for help. Literally, “Hosanna” means “help us.” So even the word “hosanna” itself has a double meaning.

I felt it yesterday when I witnessed the March for our Lives in Washington, D.C. and then in our own supportive march in Honolulu. On the one hand, the March for our Lives was a time of empowerment by and for teenagers, who are fearful for their lives and their safety. There was enthusiasm, energy, even times of joy. But there was also a cry for help, especially when the Parkland students and so many other children and youth who have lost their lives to gun violence were remembered. There was a cry, “help us.” “Save us.” The whole event brought me to tears.

So, in summary, we have two interpretations of the Palm Sunday procession, and of course, we know what happened eventually. The second interpretation proved to be the true one. Jesus did not turn out to be a conquering hero. He ended up on a cross. And so, my friends, what we have still in our own time is a suffering Messiah, a servant Messiah, a lowly, non-violent Messiah who journeys towards a cross.

This is the One who is to be found, we trust, at the center of our life together in this community of faith. Such a Messiah puts us at odds with the world surrounding us, at odds with the NRA, at odds with the prizes and glories sought after by our society, and surely the violent American culture that surrounds us. This should not come to us as a surprise, given the story that is at the very heart of the Christian movement.

For now, though, knowing what is in store for Jesus, let us leave this particular story behind, and journey with him to the cross. We will recall that journey today at the close of this service, and as we gather here in this place on Thursday and Friday. Only then, will be ready at the Easter Vigil on Saturday evening and the Easter Services on Sunday morning to raise our voices in praise to the God who makes all things new. May God’s grace be upon us during these days of remembrance as we journey through the darkness to Easter’s joy. Amen.