PALM SUNDAY/PASSION SUNDAY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“Constant Rivals”* Luke 19:28-40

On the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey there were a lot of witnesses. A lot of them were at the eastern gate waiting for him, while others lined the road as he made his way forward. As we heard: they greeted him with palm branches, by laying their coats on the road before him, and by shouting, “Hosanna!”

Although the crowd was probably not *terribly* large it was still a decent-sized parade. The salient point is that Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem was witnessed. His presence was noticed. He did not come into Jerusalem unseen or disregarded. People noticed and they came out to see him. Some would probably recount to their children, grandchildren, and others about the day they were in the crowd, they actually saw him and welcomed him.

This is one of the things we are called upon to do. We are called upon to bear witness to what we see—the goodness, but also the evil. We are to support and rejoice over the first, and we are to remember and hold accountable the second.

Which is why it is important for us to also remember what was on the other side of Jerusalem on that same day. It seems there was a larger, more impressive parade with many more people lining the streets, as well as many more people marching in the procession.

The bigger parade was for Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria. Pilate swaggered into town on a grand warhorse, leading a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. The people lining the streets were all too familiar with this procession of Roman might and power. They were forced to witness it every time there was a high holy day.

While most of the Roman soldiers were there in the city and were a constant reminder of the oppressive way people lived, Pilate did not live within the city precincts. He lived on the coast in Herod the Great’s former palace.

On high holy days, Governor Pilate would leave the breezy comfort of his seaside palace and come into Jerusalem. He would, of course, come with a particular show of force so that certain factions among the Jews—who were usually troublesome and rebellious—would think twice before embarking on yet another attempt at insurrection.

So, these two parades—these two rival events—were going to embody the central conflict of the week.

Jesus’ procession proclaimed the sovereignty of God, a realm dedicated to God’s peace through justice, compassion, and reconciliation. Jesus’ presence sought to transform the world by serving and humility, with honesty, and trustworthiness. His ministry proclaimed a new appreciation for and dedication to security and well-being for all people.

Pilate’s parade, on the other hand, was a noisy and flashy embodiment of Pax Romana—the Roman way of peace, which depended on oppression and violence. So, in addition to Pilate on his warhorse, there would have been lots of banners, shiny swords, helmets, and shields, and a couple of golden eagles mounted on poles—the symbol of the Roman empire, and also the symbol of Roman imperial theology.

This is the crucial part: according to Roman imperial theology, the emperor was not only the ruler of the Roman Empire; he was also the Son of God. This had started with the first Caesar, Caesar Augustus, and continued from him to the rest of his successors. At Jesus’ time, that would have been emperor Tiberius.

Eventually, what we know now is that these two rivaling theologies will come into conflict, and the result will bring about the Jesus’ crucifixion.

As we know, there will be witnesses to that, too. And this is another important point to remember: most crimes do not go unnoticed. There are usually witnesses. In this morning’s passage, Jesus’ response to the Pharisees’ request that he hush-up his followers is to proclaim that even if his followers were to be quiet, the very stones would cry out.

As odd or unlikely as that sounded for so much of the last two thousand years, what we know now is that the stones—and all other forensic evidence—can and does proclaim relative guilt or innocence.

However, what is still needed, more than anything else, is a community that is willing to pursue justice for those who have been harmed.

We are still called upon to be witnesses to the truth; to tell truth to power; to shelter and assist the persecuted on their journey to healing by bringing criminals to account.

This is, of course, most obvious for us—right now—in the war that is raging in Ukraine.

Although we are all hoping and praying that the invasion will be stopped quickly and the Russian war criminals will be brought to justice in a Nuremberg-style trial, as Ukrainian president Zelenskyy has called for, we know that the criminals may not be called to an account for a long time—maybe even a lifetime. This is what all criminals count on. They depend on us being too busy or too intimidated by their power and their violence to stop them and bring them to justice. The leaders, especially, believe they can insulate themselves from being held accountable with their power, their position, and their wealth.

The good news is that in the case of this war, and all others, from now on, we are much more capable of being better informed. We are going to be much better witnesses. And my hope is that this will make the difference with the war on Ukraine. I hope this will help bring it to a swifter end and that the criminals—all of them from the foot soldiers to their generals and heads of state—will face justice.

The only way this is going to happen is if we all continue to pay attention, to watch and bear witness to what these criminals are doing—to call it what it is and hold them to account whenever the time comes.

One journalist, Russell More, writing for *Christianity Today* also sees a special warrant for people of faith, and so recently he wrote: “Christians in particular should watch and recognize something we often want to ignore: [which is] how the human heart can justify great evil.”

He writes that it begins when we “emphasize power over morality. [And that] an easy way to do this is to characterize the situation as an emergency, requiring a dispensing of the ordinary norms of behavior. Every criminal regime has done this—usually by identifying one group of people as the scapegoats, and blaming them for the other group of people’s ills.”

Perhaps an even easier, more basic way to talk about this is to come to terms with the two constant rivals we all live with: the call to a life of humility, compassion, and righteousness, over and against the call to power and domination.

The latter fears or is impatient with the notion of community and communal well-being. It cannot conceive of being in partnership with anyone or anything. Violence and lies are just the cost of doing business. For such as these, sharing is weakness—better to gamble and winner takes it all.

The former values all people and wants all to live in peace and safety, enjoying and sharing in the bounty that the earth can bring forth.

When we turn back to the story we heard from Luke’s gospel, what we find is Jesus very deliberately and graphically bringing these rival theologies—these rival loyalties—to our attention.

Notice, how carefully he has planned his entrance. He knows where to find the donkey. He knows that the disciples will be asked when they go and take it away. He even tells them what to say to the people who ask they what they are doing with their donkey—and it all works! The disciples get the donkey, and Jesus rides into Jerusalem—a living contrast to the bombast and bravado of Pilate and the Romans over on the other side of town.

In effect and in deed, Jesus was asking the people of his day to decide which procession they are going to join. Two thousand years later, it is still a question that we must still grapple with because the rivalry between the two powers—these two theologies—is still with us. It always will be.

I would like to close by quoting again from Russell Moore’s article. He says this about the constant struggle between the two ways of life:

*“…the most dangerous step…is when the conscience gives up altogether and begins to say that this is just the way the world is. It shifts to saying depravity is realistic, while morality is not. We can see this in the smirk behind Putin’s words and in the throat-clearing whataboutism of his Western defenders. This is all rooted in the idea that accountability will never arrive.”*

Accountability depends on witnesses.

On the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem there were a lot of witnesses. There are a lot more now, today, in this moment. And just like the people in Jerusalem on that day, we are called to confront the rivalry that is always before us and decide which procession we will join.

My hope, my prayer, is that we will find ourselves shoulder-to-shoulder, following the Prince of Peace, serving, caring, and bearing witness to righteousness, compassion, and truth. It is what Christ did all those years ago. I pray it will be what we do, too. Amen.