

The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday – Mark 14:1-15:39
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Sedona Arizona

Hosanna! Lord, save us! Please, save us now! Deliver us from the hands of our oppressors. Deliver us from our own sinful ways. Hosanna, Lord, hosannah! Lord, send us now success.

These words shouted and prayed during our festal procession reveal just how urgently we desire God's saving grace. Today we unreservedly allow ourselves to be visible and audible evangelists for hope and healing in a broken world. Our pleas for deliverance are not that different than the ones shouted as Jesus entered Jerusalem on a colt. Our prayers for healing are no less fervent, and our hopes no less genuine. And yet, we reserve them for public expression only one day of the year – at a time when it is liturgically appropriate and socially acceptable. Perhaps this year, we are finding our steps to be a bit more hopeful, and our voices a bit more joyful, because after a long year of suffering we are more than ready to be delivered from oppression and injustice, violence and hate, sickness and death. And so we wave our palms shouting “Hosanna!” and sing while safely masked, “All glory, laud and honor, to thee, Redeemer King,” and proclaim that our fear and suffering has been alleviated, at least momentarily, by our gracious and loving God.

Perhaps today we are experiencing emotions similar to those that the first followers of Jesus felt as they gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover festival: hope for improved wellness and economic stability; trust that we will be liberated from social systems that betray God's covenant with humanity and desire for all creation; and faith that our capacity to love will be transformed by God's grace through acts of compassion and mercy, justice and peace. Our hopes and concerns are not that different despite the specifics of our circumstances.

Mark's passion narrative draws us into the cultural tensions rippling through Jerusalem. As faithful pilgrims descend on the holy city to celebrate the Passover, the religious elite seek to maintain the status quo, and Roman leaders display military grandeur in order to deter an insurrection. Although Jesus had visited Jerusalem on several previous occasions, this time was different. Crowds had followed Jesus on his earlier visits after being relieved and awed by his healing touch, and inspired by his teachings about forgiveness and love. They expressed enthusiasm and wonder about his sharing of wisdom and wellness. Yet, Jesus gently resisted accolades and quietly slipped away to proclaim the good news in other villages and towns. But this time was different. The crowds were energized by his presence, and exceedingly hopeful that Jesus would liberate them from the injustice and oppression inflicted upon them by those who pledged allegiance to the emperor. This time Jesus did not enter Jerusalem on foot. He arrived on a colt, and willingly accepted the peoples' shouts of praise as he passed over their pathway of cloaks and leafy branches.

Jesus and his followers were not the only ones to come to Jerusalem for the festival. The streets were rapidly filling with pilgrims who came from near and far to celebrate the Passover. Some knew who Jesus was and had been following him for days and weeks. Others were curious about the unusual excitement over this seemingly ordinary man. And then there were those who were suspicious of Jesus and jealous of his newly acquired status of honor. Many of those people were aligned with the imperial occupiers, including an influential group of greedy and corrupt religious leaders. Some of those who represented the powerful elite infiltrated the ranks of the peasants to get a clearer view of who this potential new

leader might be. Still others remained clearly visible in Roman militia gear asserting their place among the community as keepers of the peace.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan wrote about this extraordinary time in their perceptive account of Jesus' final days according to Mark's Gospel. In their book, *The Last Week*, Borg and Crossan offer profound insights into the political and spiritual dynamics of Jesus' passion. "Passion' is from the Latin noun '*passio*' meaning 'suffering'."¹ The Gospel passion narratives reveal great suffering in the betrayal, denial, torture, humiliation, and execution of Jesus. But Borg and Crossan remind their readers that the true passion of Jesus was his proclamation of the kingdom of heaven.² His passion, or what he was passionate about, was his way of love and equality. Jesus' message challenged the corrupt religious practices of the time and shed light of the unholy alliance between the religious elite and Roman oppressors. At the beginning of the week of Passover there were two processions into Jerusalem and two proclamations about power – the earthly power forcefully attained by Roman military conquest, and God's heavenly power peacefully revealed through the presence and passion of Jesus. The stark contrast of the two processions was visible to those who had eyes to see and ears to hear.

The city was used to seeing the heavily armored Roman militia on their war horses for religious festivals. But who was this rag-tag crowd shouting "Hosanna!" and referencing their ancestor King David? Those who hadn't yet heard of Jesus would soon find out, and at some point all people would have to affirm their allegiance to one or the other—the kingdom of Caesar or the kingdom of God. At this time of Passover, pilgrims would be gathering to give thanks for God's

¹ Borg, Marcus J. and Crossan, John Dominic. *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006, p. viii.

² *Ibid*, review by Brian McLaren, back cover.

liberation, provision and protection while recalling their ancestor's delivery from slavery and oppression under a different king. Did Jesus offer new hope for deliverance from the current tyrannical regime? Would Jesus have the power to dismantle unjust religious, social, and political systems? This is precisely what many religious elite feared. If the current imperial-religious social alliance were dismantled, their honor and economic status would evaporate along with their power and authority. The greedy and corrupt religious leaders were not only fearful for their livelihood, they were jealous that the honor they desired was now being showered upon Jesus. From their perspective, Jesus had to go.

Having Jesus arrested during the festival might have incited a riot had the religious leaders pursued their plan in broad daylight. Instead they schemed under cover of darkness when the crowds had dissipated and their attentions were focused elsewhere. This gave the instigators time to build a false narrative and gather false witnesses who would falsely accuse Jesus of treason. Jesus would be unjustly accused and imprisoned, and his trial would reveal how unjust and easily manipulated the Roman legal system could be.³

Not much has changed about human nature in more than two thousand years. Our fears and exploits are not that different despite the specifics of our circumstances. We continue to create and uphold unjust laws; we spread unsubstantiated accusations; we commit false arrest; we engage in extreme torture, humiliation, violence, hostility, and ridicule until another human being's dying breath. We have traded crucifixion for lynching and the death penalty. We choose to kill the innocent along with the guilty. We lament the injustice and then let it happen again, and again, and again. We create bigger

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/not-without-gods-power>

and more powerful weapons out of steel and chemicals. And we weaponize our bodies in thought, word, and deed. What happened to Jesus during his last days on earth is shocking but not surprising because hatred and fear has been carefully cultivated by those who have acquired power and maintained authority over the masses.

Today we continue to hear about, or witness, or personally experience some of the same kinds of hostility, humiliation, and torture that Jesus did. Fellow humans are mocking, spitting upon, violently attacking, and killing other human beings out of hatred and fear. These heinous acts are being perpetrated by ordinary people in our own cities and streets. We have chosen to dehumanize the other in the belief that we are saving our own skin. Such practices have become so normalized that they have become institutionalized parts of our social system.

After a long year of suffering due to multiple pandemics, we long to be renewed by a sense of normalcy in our daily lives. And yet, in many ways, we are now repelled by what we previously tolerated as normal. The normalization of sin is precisely what betrays God's covenant with humanity. And yet, by God's grace we are able to repent of the evil that enslaves us and amend our lives toward God's way of love. We have a choice which procession we will join and what message we will proclaim. Will we pledge our allegiance to those who exert authority by force and control, or will we "worship the one who exerts his authority by giving up control, and sacrificing his will for God's?"⁴ Our choice to follow Jesus may be a daily and life-long struggle. But our choice to follow in the way of love reveals the message of Christ's passion on the cross, and his eternal passion for humanity.

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⁴ <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-hosanna/>