**The Heavy Journey**

Palm Sunday, April 13, 2025

FCCH Rev. Karla Miller

I grew up in a small town that LOVED a parade. We had a homecoming parade, an Independence Day parade, a county fair parade, an antique farm show parade~~all down main street. Band Day was the best, where high school bands around the region, plus any other kind of band~~the kazoo band from the Sons of Norway to the clonky ping of the rhythm band from the nursing home marched or rolled down the street. Today, the tradition stands.

Parades are a human endeavor, with a long and diverse history evolving from religious rituals, military displays and cultural celebrations. The earliest parades likely originated in pre-historic times, with examples found in Spanish cave paintings showing hunters returning with their bounty~~35,000-11,000 BP. We know the ancient Babylonians celebrated Akitu, a spring festival as early as 2,000 BC—the modern version of Akitu re-emerged in the mid-twentieth century in Iraq.

If we had been part of the story told in the gospel of John, we would have had two parades to choose from at the beginning of Passover in Jerusalem. Hundreds of pilgrims journeyed to celebrate at the holy temple, swelling the population to more than twice its size. It was the perfect opportunity for the Roman Occupation to stage a military parade. In assertion of domination, there would have been lock step marching, gleaming weaponry, and rich pageantry of pomp and power. It was a calculated intimidation tactic to remind any Jewish resistance of what they might be up against.

At another gate of the holy city, the second parade happened, hardscrabble and seemingly thrown together in the moment. How silly Jesus must have looked, riding on a donkey, in comparison to Pilate on a war stallion. Pilate showed off his highly decorated army; and Jesus came with a riff-raff conglomeration of share-cropping farmers, low paid workers, children, street beggars, sprinkled with a few loathed tax collectors, and widows and middle class sympathizers to the cause. Make no mistake, though~ Jesus little procession was actually one of his most brilliant political actions, for the palm branch waving and shouts of Hosanna was a parody of Roman despots. It sent a counter message~~instead of the rule of fear and violence, and tyranny, the kin-dom of God, the rule of love was about peace and abundance. The two ideas of power clashed throughout the events that unfolded throughout the rest of the week, resulting in the death of Jesus.

So, which parade would you choose?

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

In Jesus’ Palm Sunday parade, the people shouted "Hosanna! Hosanna!” Do you know what it means? It means “God save Us”. It was a cry for help in the midst of system of domination marked by political oppression, economic exploitation, and religious legitimation.

Does this sound familiar?

For me, never before I have felt the heaviness of the meaning of the path of Jesus, the ways in which he strove for the dream of God in the midst of of forces of an empire so powerful that resistance felt puny and insignificant.

When I look at the news of innocent, legal immigrants being swept off the street and deported to heinous imprisonment in detention centers in El Salvador, when our present administration seeks to bully the world with capricious tariffs on islands of penguins, and capricious cuts to essential aid for impoverished, when I bear witness to the power of a narcisstic leader who threatens martial law and desires a military parade on his birthday, well, my fear is ignited, my anger rises, and my sense of “not enough-ness” is activated. It is heavy.

I do celebrate resistance to that oppressive power~~taking heart in peaceful, joyful rallies and protests, writing my elected officials, admiring a senator giving a long winded speech of over 25 hours to delay a vote on an ambassador to NATO, and especially, in church people handing out red “Know Your Rights” cards to immigrants in our community…. these small actions are essential, and yet, the oppressive powers and principalities continue to hold in contempt and disregard those who are most vulnerable in our society. still so much more to done. This journey is heavy, heavy, heavy. How easy it would be to stick our heads in the sand, to not stay the course and just give in.

Friends, we stand here at the end of the Jesus parade this morning, a respite of joy and song, at the beginning of Holy Week. We stand here weary from the heaviness of a real life journey of several months, which has left our minds reeling, and our hearts catching with fear.

We stand here, pilgrims at the gates of our Jerusalem. A walk through Holy Week might be too staggering~~I mean, there is the fracas in the Temple, when Jesus chases out the moneychangers; there is the betrayal by Judas, there is the last Supper, the denial of Peter, the trial and beating of Jesus, the mocking and spitting as he drags a cross to his death on Golgotha. How can this narrative be one of passion and transformation and hope, in the midst of Empire, cruelty, betrayal and treachery?

I \*think\* we might find an answer in the crucifixion.

But if you are thinking I am going to say something like “Jesus died for our sins so we could go to heaven and escape from this horrible world”….well, I am not.

I do not think that Jesus was sacrificed by God to save us. That would go directly against the idea of a indiscriminate love for all, no matter who or where they are in life.

I see nothing redeeming of Jesus dying on the cross.

Let me be clear: According to our christian story, the Romans arrested Jesus for insurrection against the government eventually sentencing him to death by crucifixion. Rome used “crucifixion as an instrument of extreme dehumanization, a pubic spectacle to deter the slightest hint of subversion. Abandoned by his followers except for a few women watching Jesus die on the cross from a safe distance, the agony of this moment is excruciating.

To paraphrase scholar Marcus Borg, It was Jesus’ passion for the kin-dom of God, a passion for justice and extravagant compassion that “led to Jesus’ passion of his suffering and death.”

So, what to make of the cross. Is there any meaning in it at all?

The Rev. Dr. James Cone, one of my professors in seminary and revolutionary black theologian compared the tyranny of Roman crucifixion to the painful legacy of racial terror and lynching in the United States. In the years following emancipation, public lynching became an unthinkable intimidation tactic, a racist nightmare. Lynchings were public spectacles, festive gatherings of white people who not only watched, but participated in the mutilation, dismemberment, burning and hanging of black bodies. “Eerily reminiscent of Golgotha, white attendees were even known to fight over the victim’s possessions and various relics from the lynching.”

It is no wonder the symbol of the cross is problematic, because it can be a symbol of the crucifixion in our world. What we do to Earth’s body, our own bodies, vulnerable bodies, we do to God’s body.

And yet, Dr. Cone does not stop there. There is something salvific in the nature of Jesus crucifixion, and it is this: The

The cross demonstrated God’s complete solidarity with human suffering and mortality. Even more, Dr. Cone reminds us that our own salvation, our own saving grace in this life is intimately connected to “our solidarity with the crucified people [and our crucified earth and her creatures, her life force] in our midst.”

We are invited into the suffering of Jesus, he writes, because attention to suffering is the first step in God’s mission of human wholeness. There is no shortage of crucified and suffering people and beings in our lives today—from the scourges of racism embedded in our society, to the tangible horrors of mass shootings, to the minimum wage worker carrying two or three jobs in order to feed her children, and beyond.

So as we walk through Holy Week, we are faced with the juxtapositiono of imperial power and love; greed and compassion; broken-ness and wholeness. We are asked to consider God’s passion and Jesus’ passion for the world, and we are faced with the journey of our own personal transformation.

We have arrived in Jerusalem, friends, and we have a journey to the cross to make, if we choose to. How will you walk that journey? Will you stumble through it, grasping at finding meaning for your own dying and resurrection?

Will you tread lightly, wondering how to make sense of the domination of Power in your life that is not life-giving? Will you plod through, recognizing how you have betrayed yourself, others? How will you embody solidarity with the crucified in your midst, and beyond? I know, I know, this journey is heavy.

As you walk, may your heart and soul be guided by God, inspired by Spirit, and challenged by Jesus, our friend and brother, who walks and grieves with us in this suffering, broken world.

Amen.