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April 5, 2009

Palm/Passion Sunday

The Entrance into Jerusalem and other portions of Mark's Passion story from chapter 14

A Parade of Protest to the End

Earlier in the service, we read Mark 11:1-10 – Jesus' entry into Jerusalem

Jesus had already “been acting out.” From the moment he made his way into Jerusalem, Jesus had been purposefully acting in questionable ways, in provocative ways. You saw his provocation of the “powers that be” as he launched his parade of protest—the parade whose narration we read at the beginning of our service today as we stood outside with our palm branches. Now, we do not often think of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem as political theatre, as a parade of protest, but that is exactly what it was. Jesus staged his parade to directly contrast with the other parade happening that day in Jerusalem.

For even though Scripture does not record another parade happening that day, we know from historians that throughout the first century, Rome always staged an imperial parade in Jerusalem at the time of the major Jewish festival of Passover. After all, Passover was the festival that celebrated the Jewish people's liberation from their earlier Egyptian oppressors. So Rome always wanted to be proactive and squash anybody's misbegotten idea that they could be or should be liberated again, this time from Rome. Therefore, Rome's imperial parade was constructed to announce the raw political and military power of the empire. It was constructed to visually demonstrate the reign and control of Rome over the people.

The imperial parade was led each year by Pontius Pilate – the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea and Samaria. He rode in from the west on his war horse, at the head of a column of imperial Calvary and soldiers. The people who gathered on the side of the road to watch would see big strong horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, and golden eagles mounted on poles. They would hear the marching of feet, the cracking of leather, the clinking of bridles, and the beating of drums¹. And I am sure that as they watched and heard the sounds of Pilate's parade, they had no doubt who was in charge of both their lives and their deaths.

But on that day, across town, another parade was also gearing up to begin. And this one, Jesus' parade, looked and sounded very different from Pilate's parade. At Jesus' parade, the peasants who lined the streets to watch saw a man riding in from the east, not the west, and sitting atop a colt, not a war horse. Like Pilate, Jesus rode at the front of a group, but his group was not the finely organized column of foot soldiers and Calvary. Rather, Jesus led a rather unorganized bunch of men and women walking alongside and behind him. They were not wearing their military finest, but rather, they were wearing sandals with normal, everyday working clothing. They were dusty and a bit disheveled looking. Unlike Pilate's following, Jesus' group was not an impressive display of power, by any stretch of the imagination. But, they were an impressive display of devotion.

And the peasants who gathered alongside the road to watch declared their own devotion too. Unlike the stone-faced, silent, and intimidated crowds watching Pilate's parade, these spectators joined in the fun and the carnival-type atmosphere. They took off their cloaks and spread them on the road ahead of Jesus, creating their version of a red carpet, if you will. And they cut off leafy branches in the fields and waved them shouting “Hosanna, Hosanna, Save Us, Save Us.”

Men and women, children, people young and old, all shouting praises and cheering on their leader in a strange parade of protest. And stories were circulating in the crowd about this man Jesus—stories about his parables of the reign of God. Stories about repentance and healing. Stories about newness and forgiveness. Stories about justice and peace. And I am sure that as Jesus rode that little colt and looked around him at all those who had gathered to celebrate his arrival and his reign, he prayed that they were starting to remember again who was

really in charge of both their lives and their deaths. He prayed that they might find life through their participation in his parade. That they might indeed find their salvation.

Yes, Jesus had already been “acting out” from the moment he made his way into Jerusalem. But he knew that it was all just beginning.

Mark 14:1-11

It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The religious leaders were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; for they said, ‘Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.’

While Jesus was at Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard. And she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger, ‘Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.’ And they scolded her.

But Jesus said, ‘Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.’

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray Jesus to them. When the religious leaders heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give Judas money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray Jesus.

Jesus’ “acting out” continued after his arrival. First, he went straight into the temple and caused some trouble, turning over the tables of the money changers and challenging the religious authorities as to who they truly worshipped – the empire or God.

And then, he made his way to Bethany, a name that literally means “the house of suffering.” I suppose that should not surprise us. Because Jesus’ mission was to show us, to live for us, what God is like. Jesus’ mission was to express the mind and the heart of God. So we should not be surprised that during the last week of his life, he walked straight into the house of suffering.

And not only that, but he once again went where holy people feared to tread – he went to the house of Simon the **leper**. Even near the end of his life, Jesus was still pushing against those boundaries of what we considered right and good, clean and appropriate. Even near the end of his life, Jesus was challenging the dominant social order of thingsⁱⁱ. He entered the house of suffering and went straight to the home of the outcast. In many ways, his parade of protest against the reign of the empire continued long after the crowds had drifted away.

And as if all that were not enough to stir the pot, here she comes. In Mark’s Gospel, she does not even have a name. She simply walks in, goes straight to Jesus, kneels down and breaks open her jar of precious oil. She pours it extravagantly on his head as she anoints him. Anoints him with the oil. Anoints him with her love. Anoints him with her adoration.

She could not have been wealthy. I doubt that a wealthy woman would have made her way to the house of suffering, to the home of an outcast. A wealthy woman would not have had that kind of freedom to buck such social norms. But a poor woman—she did not count as much. And when the disciples accused her of being

wasteful in regards to the poor, she probably had to bite her tongue. She knew exactly what she was doing and how much she could have gotten for that oil. She knew what it was worth. She knew what using that oil meant in terms of her own survival and livelihood. And that is exactly why she did it.

She had to have encountered Jesus along his way. For she knew what he had said about his impending death. She knew what he had said about his pouring himself out for the sake of the world. She knew what he had said about the arrival of God's reign. But unlike the rest of the disciples, she had taken him at his word. And she must have known that if she did not anoint his body for his burial right then and there, she would not get another chance. Because she was running out of time. Jesus was running out of time. His counter-parade of protest, his acting out, was getting a lot of attention from all the authorities—both religious and secular. It was just a matter of days now, until his arrest.

So she came right into that house, walked right up to Jesus, and anointed his head with oil as her cup of blessing overflowed. Just as prophets anointed the heads of kings in the Hebrew scripture, she anointed the head of her King, her Lord, her Messiah. She had taken him at his word about his mission and how it was leading to his death. And she knew that the only proper response to such extravagant divine love was extravagant adoration and gratitude. She acted as an unlikely prophet. And he received it as an unlikely king.

And Judas took it all in. And his heart, instead of being warmed by such faithfulness, grew hardened by resentment.

Mark 14:26-42

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. And Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters; for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered." But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.' Peter said to him, 'Even though all become deserters, I will not.' Jesus said to him, 'Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.' But Peter said vehemently, 'Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.' And all of the disciples said the same.

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and Jesus said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.' And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.'

He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' And again Jesus went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. He came a third time and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.'

If we ever want to know what honest, unbridled prayer looks like, we can remember this time in Jesus' life as he prayed in the Garden. In verse 33, our translation says that Jesus was distressed and agitated. But the Greek words are even stronger. Interpreters throughout the years have translated Jesus' reaction in the Garden as: shuddering awe; terrified surprise; the distress which follows great shock; appalled; confused and restless; that half-distracted emotional state that follows physical derangement or mental distressⁱⁱⁱ. That night, in the Garden, Jesus was in deep, deep grief.

Needless to say, according to the Gospel of Mark, there was no romance in martyrdom. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus does not face his destiny of suffering and crucifixion with any kind of contemplative detachment. Rather, in the face of what he knows is coming, Jesus feels genuine human terror.^{iv} I find that difficult to hear—to hear that Jesus, God-with-us, was terrified. Maybe it is because I secretly still want Jesus to be more like a spiritual superhero who swoops in and makes everything okay, rather than a truly human/fully divine Savior who refused to just play act at being human, but rather who took on real flesh and real blood and felt real terror and died a real death.

But though Jesus' deeply grieved emotional and spiritual state might be hard for us to hear, Peter and the others managed to deal with it just fine. They slept through it. Jesus asked them three different times to stay awake, to stay in solidarity with him in prayer as he went to sweat it out with the Father. But their eyes were too heavy. They could not do it. They could not even stay awake. Who knows—maybe they did not want to see what was happening to their Jesus. Maybe they, like you and me, could not handle seeing their Jesus enter such a place of deep distress. Maybe it was just easier to detach and to go numb and to sleep through it, to escape in their dreams, hoping it was all just a nightmare anyway.

But Jesus was not about to let them avoid it. He was especially not going to let Peter avoid it. Rather, he administered a little wake-up call of his own to his Rock, his Peter. “**Simon**, are you asleep?” Jesus called him Simon, not Peter. Jesus called him the name that Peter had BEFORE he had answered the call to discipleship, before he had been commissioned. That night in the garden, Peter kept falling asleep and every time Jesus returned, Jesus saw less of the Peter he envisioned as his follower, and more of the old Simon he had once been. We have to wonder if Peter shuddered when Jesus called him that old name, that Simon name. After all they had been through together, how could Jesus think that he had not changed? He had changed. He had become a faithful follower. He was Peter, not Simon. He was Jesus' rock, the one who would stand with Jesus right up until and through the end. Right?

Mark 14:43-50

Immediately, while Jesus was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, ‘The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.’ So when Judas came, he went up to Jesus at once and said, ‘Rabbi!’ and kissed him.

Then they laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to the authorities and the crowd, ‘Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled.’ All of the disciples deserted Jesus and fled.

We are not sure when Judas' heart hardened so much. We are not sure exactly why, either. The Gospel of John places the blame on the devil. John writes that the moment Jesus put the bread of communion into Judas' mouth, the devil entered into him. Mark does not make such a claim. Rather, Mark seems to always want to remind us that Judas was just one of the 12 disciples, just one of us. Mark always follows Judas' name with “one of the 12.” It is never Judas the Betrayer. It is always just Judas, one of the 12. It is as if Mark does not want us to let ourselves off the hook. With John's “the devil made me do it” defense, we can easily let ourselves off the hook. But in Mark, Judas is just one of the 12, one just like you and me.

And, just like you and me, Judas had a few moth-eaten holes in his baptismal robe of discipleship. Just enough space between who he was and who God was calling him to be for betrayal to slip in, take root and grow. Maybe Judas was tired of waiting for Jesus to take the world by storm and thought that betraying him would force his hand into action.

Maybe Judas did not support Jesus' calm parade of protest and wanted Jesus to ride in just like Pilate – on a war horse, followed by the armies of a liberator. Or maybe Judas was scared by Jesus—by the demands of discipleship, the expectations of faithfulness, the constant urging to put others first and self last. Maybe Judas thought he simply could not do it anymore. He was too weary to take up his cross. And that weariness led to anger. And that anger led him to the authorities to make a deal.

More than likely, because being human is neither simple nor uncomplicated, many different things watered and fed the roots of Judas' betrayal. All we know is that Judas, one of the 12, betrayed his Messiah, his rabbi, with a kiss.

And that kiss, typically an act of love, of devotion, of friendship, that kiss must have pierced Jesus' heart just as much as the nails would pierce his hands. He was being betrayed by someone who was one of the closest people to him—part of his new family—and he was being betrayed by an act of love turned to an act of loathing. A kiss.

And before Jesus had time to react, they had laid hands on him and arrested him. And brief violence broke out and by the time the dust had settled, Jesus looked around and realized that the rest of his new family, the rest of his disciples, had all fled. And the only faces he saw gathered around were faces of hate. And they led him away as the kiss of betrayal still burned into his cheek as it did into his heart. And his parade of protest, a parade that now consisted only of him, marched on.

ⁱ Borg and Crossan. The Last Week. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006. Pages 2-3.

ⁱⁱ Myers, Ched. Binding the Strong Man. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998. Page 359.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 366.

^{iv} Ibid, p. 366