

“Holy Protest”

Sermon from Matthew 21:1-16

Given Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020

for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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As they approached Jerusalem, entering Beth-Phage at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent off two disciples with the instructions, “Go into the village straight ahead of you, and immediately you will find a tethered donkey with her colt standing beside her. Untie them and lead them back to me. If anyone questions you, say, ‘The Rabbi needs them.’ Then they will let them go at once.” This came about to fulfill what was said through the prophet: “Tell the daughter of Zion, ‘Your Sovereign comes to you without display, riding on a donkey, on a colt – the foal of a beast of burden.’” So the disciples went off and did what Jesus had ordered. They brought the donkey and her colt, and after they laid their cloaks on the animals, Jesus mounted and rode toward the city.

Great crowds of people spread their cloaks on the road, while some began to cut branches from trees and lay them along the path. The crowds – those who went in front of Jesus and those who followed – were all shouting, “Hosanna to the Heir to the House of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Most High! Hosanna in the highest!” As Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up to its depths, demanding, “Who is this?” And the crowd kept answering, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee!”

When Jesus entered the Temple, he drove out all those who were selling and buying there. He overturned the tables of money changes and the seats of those selling doves. He said to them, “Scripture says, ‘My house is called a house of prayer,’ but you

make it a den of thieves!" Those who were blind or couldn't walk came to him in the Temple, and he healed them.

When the chief priests and teachers of the Law saw the wonderful things Jesus did, and heard the children shouting, "Hosanna to the Heir to the House of David!" throughout the Temple area, they became indignant. "Do you hear what the children are shouting?" they asked him. "Yes," Jesus replied. "Have you never read, 'From the mouth of children and nursing babies, you have brought forth praise'?"

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When my kids were little, I took them to a protest in Kansas City. There had been a string of racially-biased incidents against African Americans and an organization called SURJ, Standing Up for Racial Justice, was calling on white allies to come and stand against those actions. We brought candles and signs and took our place on a corner that saw a lot of traffic. And the organizers of the protest moved among the crowd with a megaphone, trying out different chants, seeing which ones might catch on. And one that did made my kid's eyes grow wide.... A young woman approached from elsewhere in the crowd, planted herself on the corner where we stood, and began shouting, "No justice, no peace! No racist-ass police!"

I guess she needed the right amount of syllables to make the chant work. And it did. It caught on, and soon everyone around

us had joined in. And my oldest, who was then I think only five, just stared up at me... I think he wanted to see if I was saying it. I think he wanted to see if I would approve of him saying it. It was a word he knew, but he knew he shouldn't have known it.... He was worried, and excited, and scandalized, all at once.

And here's the thing: I don't want my kids to say curse words. But there was just so much more happening in that scene. And my kid didn't know it. He'd come with me under a pretense I'd totally sanitized for him: "we're going to stand with people for what's right. There have been some unfair things happening to people of color, and we want to say that we love them, and we are here for them, and we want to show the city that we won't tolerate them treating people in ways that are cruel and unfair." All true. But nothing I said there scandalized my kid. Hearing a woman yell "ass" over a megaphone is what scandalized my kid.

And maybe kids can handle different kinds of information, different levels of intensity, at different ages. But I wonder what it means for them, and about us, that the real injustices, the real horrors of our world, sometimes play second concerns that are really, in the end, pretty trivial.

Like, think back to that first Palm Sunday: there are two parades happening. Did you know this? There are two parades, and the reason the second parade, the one where Jesus rides through town, the reason that even happens, the context that gives it its meaning, is the first parade. And the first parade is bigger, and better. It's happening in the center of town, and in it, all the trappings of empire are on display. This parade is the full force and potential for violence of the occupying power marching through, and it happens as the people are coming to town, to the Temple, for their religious festivals. It's meant to serve as warning, as intimidation. Religion posits a different power, and the empire knows that, and so during this festival the empire wants to have not just the last word but also the first one.

The empire's parade says, "Sure, come to town. Have your festival. But don't ever forget who's really in charge here." Its parade celebrated our eternal fascination with machinery that can kill, with tools designed specifically to remind people of their subjugated place, and people lined up to see it. Maybe they cheered? Maybe they cowered? I don't know. But they

showed up, because that is what empire does: it demands attention.

And it's important to know about this other parade because that's what tells us that what happens on the outskirts of town, with this other crowd, waving palms and lying cloaks on the floor, cheering an entrance "without display" – some translations say "gentle" here – it tells us that this is more than just a group gathered to clap for Jesus. This is also a group gathered in protest of empire. What they're yelling here, "Hosanna" – it means "save us." That's what they cry out. Save us from this violence. Save us from this farce, this force. Save us from being drawn to it, from being drawn in by it. Save us from ourselves and from all who would tell us we find our worth in how well we obey, in how much this empire approves of us.

Jesus goes from this parade into the Temple, maybe to begin that saving work – and it is his own protest. It is his own redoing of the way things are. It is its own kind of violent reordering. And it is followed by healing. And the children praise it. What are we to make of that? What are we to do in our own streets, and sacred places, in response?

This is a day when we take up all the trappings of a tradition not our own. We sing “hosanna” and we wave palms. But what of this story translates to our time? What are we asking to be saved from? What are the scandals of today’s empires that we line up and cheer for?

Karl Barth famously suggested holding our scriptures in one hand, and our newspapers in the other. Both tell sacred stories, because they tell the stories of our lives, of who and how we are together.

These days, the newspapers tell of heroic acts of sacrifice of health care workers and horrifying acts of racism against Asian-Americans. These days, they reiterate the profound need for services for all people, and they tell of what happens to the most vulnerable among us in isolation. These days, they tell of ordinary people making masks and protecting each other, and of empires arguing amongst themselves about how generous it is really possible to be, and what we’re willing to sacrifice for each other. And some of it – like the ways we sacrifice each other when we are scared – is scandalous.

And always, scripture tells us of the love and courage and creativity of Jesus, and those who followed his ways – tells us there are powers other than empire, there are powers greater than those that parade their potential for violence, there are powers who turn us toward each other, so that we might hear each other crying out to be saved, and we might know how to begin to answer that call.

Let us pray: *Holy One, we are already so tender these days. And we would ask that you keep us open, and attentive; scandalized by what matters, hopeful for what still might be, trusting in the power that is your love. Amen.*