

Lent 1 - Wandering Heart: "Songs of loudest praise"

John 12:12-16

A sermon preached at Plymouth Presbyterian Church,

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Today's scripture is about the entry of two kings on the stone streets Jerusalem. The two kings that entered, enter from separate entrances. Both kings entered Jerusalem around the time of the Passover, but for very different reasons.

The first king (small k), not mentioned in this Bible passage, entered Jerusalem from the west, having just conquered another territory. The chief reason for this parade was to demonstrate his military might and to revel in the victory. The poor people would be pushed back so the wealthy observers could have the best views as the king and his army pranced into town with their flashy armor and shiny swords. Chariots, helmets, spears, the whole deal - this was about spectacle. The king came in on a grand stallion, perfectly groomed with a shiny coat for all to admire. This was about intimidation and control. The ultimate display of political empire.

The first king entered Jerusalem at the time of the Passover for another reason as well. The Romans wanted to keep the Jews of Jerusalem under control. Passover, after all, was a reminder of the time that God saved the Israelites from the oppression of the Egyptians. At the time this story was being celebrated, the Romans didn't want the Jews to get any ideas about freedom (we all know what a contagious idea *that* is!). And what better way to remind them of their place as an occupied people than to parade into Jerusalem, displaying Rome's strength at the occasion of another colonial victory. The name of this first king was Pontius Pilate.

The second king, who is central to this scripture passage, entered Jerusalem from the east, from the Mount of Olives. He had conquered no territory, secured no military victories. Instead of pushing the poor people back, everyone was invited to come view his entrance. This procession had no weapons to see, no chariots, helmets, spears, or shiny objects. There was no army following as far as the eye could see. In fact, this second king did not process in on a grand stallion. Instead, he entered on a young donkey, an unthinkable act for a kingly ruler. This king had no interest in intimidation or control. He had no concern for a display of political empire because his kingdom superseded any earthly kingdom.

The second king, coming in on that lowly colt, had done many great things. And that's why the crowd was calling him "blessed." They had heard many stories. Stories of him curing a man with an unclean spirit. Stories of him healing a woman with a high fever. Stories of healing a leper and a paralytic. Stories of him saying that "blessed are the poor, the hungry, and those who weep." Stories of him preaching love for their enemies - something that no Roman emperor would *ever* say. They had even heard a story of him feeding five thousand plus people with nothing more than a few loaves of bread and a couple fish.

These were the reasons they were saying "blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." They wanted peace and they wanted this king to overthrow the Romans but it was yet to be seen whether or not he would do so in the fashion that they expected. The name of this second king was Jesus Christ.

The Luke gospel adds a note of the stones of the street. "The stones would cry out..." If the stones could shout out, they would tell the stories of these two kings - two kings with very different styles and very different messages. One king wishes to dominate and intimidate, the

other wishes to invite and to heal. One king processes in after a military victory, the other king does so after preaching about turning the other cheek. One king is followed by an endless trail of mighty warriors, the other king is followed by a bunch of fishermen, tax-collectors, and other commoners with no weapons. One king approaches Jerusalem from the west, the other from the east.

The two kings are bound to collide. And collide they will.

You see, this collision was predicted by some of the Pharisees; particularly, the ones that implored Jesus to silence his followers saying “blessed is the king!” The Pharisees liked to play nice with the Romans and they knew that this display of political controversy would no doubt attract the attention of the Romans, particularly the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who had entered the city only days prior to keep a firm hand on any potential insurrection by the Jews.

A pot of turmoil was being stirred. The second king, Jesus, was not the only leader stirring the pot. Pontius Pilate was stirring the pot of discontent as well. For he did not understand the Jews very well and decided that, rather than try to understand them, he would alienate and threaten them. He did so by placing golden shields of Roman deities in the Temple itself, an act of supreme insult to the Jewish religion. It desecrated the Jewish Temple.

The pot, indeed, was being stirred. And both of these kings were stirring it in their own ways - Pilate, by asserting supreme Roman authority, and Jesus, by challenging that authority.

But the way that Jesus chose to challenge this authority is peculiar. He did not challenge this authority by raising an army of his own - to be certain, a task Jesus could have done had he wished to do so. Instead he asserted the authority of God by embodying another kind of law, a law to love one another at whatever cost.

The disciples, Peter included, did not understand what the “Hosannas” of the crowd signified. But Peter and the would learn in the days to come. And then they would sing songs of loudest praise.

Today is the beginning of what we call Holy Week. The entirety of the season of Lent prepares us for the dramatic events that are to follow as we watch this collision happen. This congregation has much work to do and I invite you to join us as we walk with Jesus to the cross and the empty tomb. Simply put, there is something to do on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday this week to follow this “second king” who chooses to come into Jerusalem on no high horse, but instead on a lowly colt to demonstrate power through love instead of power through violence and oppression. There is a story to be told, the most important story of our faith, and we will gather together to tell this story.

If the stones could talk...

In Luke’s gospel terms, if the stones could cry out, what would they cry?

If the stones in the walls of that upper room could talk, they would tell the story of Jesus inviting his friends to the Table on Maundy Thursday, breaking bread with them. The stones would tell us the story of how Jesus broke the bread and poured the cup, distributing the bread of life and the cup of salvation. They would tell us of how Jesus got on his knees and washed the feet of his disciples, an act that would be laughable to think of Pontius Pilate doing.

If the stones in the walls of that upper room could talk, they would tell the story of how Satan entered the heart of Judas. They would tell the story of Jesus telling his disciples of a new commandment, more powerful than any edict Pontius Pilate could ever pronounce, a command to love one another just as Jesus had loved them. The stones would tell us that Jesus told them (and us) that they will know we are his disciples by the love we show for one another.

If the stones in the gate of the Garden of Gethsemane could talk, they would tell us of Jesus meeting the guards on Good Friday to take him away for crucifixion. They would tell us that one of Jesus' followers (Peter) would cut off one of the guard's ears and that Jesus, continuing his act of love to the end, healed that man's ear.

If the stones in Herod's palace could talk, they would tell us that an innocent man was being sentenced to death for no reason other than his inconvenient gospel of love and life. They would tell us that he was beaten and made to carry the very cross upon which he would hang.

If the stones of the hill of Golgotha could talk, they would tell us of Jesus crying for God to forgive the very people who were crucifying him. They would tell us that he took his final breath and died.

If the stone that sealed the tomb could speak, it would tell us of Jesus' lifeless body lying cold in that dark hole.

And, if we stick around long enough, that same stone will tell us a different story one week from today.

Friends, if we were silent, and didn't tell this story, the story that begins today with Palm Sunday, the stones themselves would shout out. But there is no need for that. We will tell the story. This week will be one filled with reading, with prayer, and perhaps some tears as well. But the tears will not last, for good news is on the way. Let's gather and sing songs of loudest praise together.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

We believe in Jesus of Nazareth,

who rode through the streets of Jerusalem on a donkey.

We believe in Jesus of Nazareth,

who challenged Rome's oppressive power with peaceful protest.

We believe in Jesus of Nazareth,

who was surrounded by crowds of dreamers and believers.

We believe in Jesus of Nazareth,

so even today, we will sing songs of loudest praise.

Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!