

Palms or Passion?

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Text: Luke 19:28-40

When I began my ministry in Rhinelander, I realized that I had never led a Palm Sunday service. As a layperson in our national offices, I had preached often in local churches, but never on the big church days, like Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, or Palm Sunday. Those are days when a church really doesn't want a visiting preacher. So I sought advice from a friend, the pastor who preached at my ordination. About Palm Sunday, he said, "Your assignment, should you choose to accept it, is to be the ass that carries Jesus into town." Maybe he knew that one of the 37 verses that St. Theodulph, who composed our Palm Sunday hymn, "All Glory, Laud and Honor," goes, "Be thou, O Lord, the rider, and I thy little ass. That to the Holy City, together we will pass." You can see why that verse didn't make the cut.

But Palm Sunday *is* a complicated day, so we need to set the scene.

When Jesus came to town, there was an ongoing insurgency against the Roman occupiers. There had been an average of three riots a year in Jerusalem over the past six years. But the Romans were trying to put the best face on things. They had explained that they really wanted to bring the benefits of Roman civilization to Judaea, not to mention the stability of the Roman Peace. They didn't really want to rule these people. After all, for years they'd endorsed and supported a local Jewish dynasty, the dynasty that produced the Herods. But Jerusalem had just been too unruly. It was unmanageable without a sizeable military presence. And where there's a military presence, there has to be a military ruler. And this is how Pontius Pilate had gotten involved. Oh, and by the way, he collected taxes as well. The benefits of occupation don't come cheap.

But what was really complicating things was religion. The Romans didn't really care about what people believed; what was important was whether or not they respected the emperor. And, yes, no

doubt about it, they'd made mistakes in the area of religious sensitivity. There was the time, for example, when the Roman legions under Pilate had marched into Jerusalem bearing images of Caesar, whom the Romans worshiped as a god. This hadn't gone over well with the Jewish population, for whom there was only one God, a God so transcendent that his name couldn't be uttered. There had been a spontaneous riot after that, and literally hundreds of rebels had been crucified, the crosses lining the roads. These people had to be reminded who was in charge, after all. But after that, Pilate had worked hard to smooth his relationship with the Jewish leaders, and by now they seemed to be cooperative. After all, both Pilate and those leaders had a common enemy: religious extremism. Both Pilate and the Jewish leaders were opposed by the Zealots, a group of committed militants who were seeking to free Palestine from Roman rule. The Zealots didn't just hate the Romans; they also had utter contempt for their own religious establishment, a group of insiders who were far too cozy with the Romans for the Zealots' tastes.

And today, the day we call Palm or Passion Sunday, marked the beginning of the week when Passover began. To the general air of dissatisfaction and the constant threat of open rebellion was added religious fervor, and we know how volatile the mixture of religion and nationalism can be. So though Pilate normally resided in Caesarea, on the shore of the Mediterranean, he just had to be in Jerusalem for Passover, for the period when thousands of Jews from all over the world would congregate in that troublesome city. He knew that if there was to be another riot, or even revolution, this would be a likely time for it to happen. And this Jesus was a big question mark. Pilate had to be there. So, as Jesus was entering the city with his motley entourage through one of its gates on Palm Sunday, Pilate was likely entering through another gate with some well-trained Roman soldiers. The stage was set for palms and for passion.

All of the participants in the ensuing drama during what we call Holy Week came to this Palm Sunday with their expectations, with their fears, their fervor, and their frustrations. The religious authorities were afraid that Jesus would upset the comfortable arrangement they had worked out with Pilate. In today's passage from Luke, we read that the people in the crowd were calling Jesus a king: they were saying that he was a king who had been sent by God to free them from their oppression by the Romans. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord," they cried as they covered the streets in front of him with their cloaks and with palm branches. "Tell them to shut up!" some of the Pharisees

appealed to Jesus. “Your followers are going to cause trouble for all of us.” “You know,” Jesus told them, “I could tell them to be quiet, but the injustice and oppression of this place is so great that even the stone walls would cry out if these people were silenced.” So, the religious leaders’ expectation of what was going to happen during this fateful week was a fearful expectation. They expected trouble; they feared that Jesus had come not only to unseat the Romans, but also to displace them from their positions of privilege.

And there were those crowds. They’d heard about Jesus, they knew that he was a descendant of David, and they had long expected such a charismatic figure, a messiah, to come and free them from their current misery. But what was this business of the donkey? Where was the prancing stallion, or the war chariot? And why hadn’t Jesus mobilized troops who could stand up to, and finally defeat those Roman troops who were coming into the city through that other gate? Yes, the crowds shouted their hosannas as Jesus passed, but perhaps already they had begun to suspect that Jesus wasn’t the messiah they wanted him to be.

And Pilate? Well, probably Pilate’s anxieties actually were eased as the week progressed. Pilate operated as an administrator with one over-riding value, which can be summed up by the words spoken to the poor Okies by the ranch bookkeeper in *Grapes of Wrath*, “We don’t want no trouble here.” As the week went on, after Jesus further antagonized the Jewish leaders by exposing the hypocrisy and the abuses of the temple, and as the common folk were coming to realize that Jesus didn’t have an army and didn’t want one, we can imagine Pilate saying to himself, “Let the Jews fight among themselves; it’s so much better that than having them fight me.”

All those expectations, all those hopes and fears, on that day that we call Palm Sunday, on the day that in retrospect was also to become Passion Sunday. And Jesus looked out over this welter of emotions, of conflicting motives; he looked over all those people who were trying to tell him and each other who he was, and he said, “If you, even you, knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.” Everybody was looking for the wrong thing. They all were seeking to define Jesus according to their own specifications, even after he had told them clearly who he was. It’s just that they hadn’t liked the answer. They hadn’t liked it when Jesus told them that he had come not to be served

but to serve, not to embody the love of power, but rather, in his life and death, to be the incarnation of the power of love.

And, in the end, everybody had to decide what to do about Jesus. The religious leaders had to decide whether they could tolerate him, and his blistering criticism. They had to decide whether they could abide his ability to get to the heart of things, to cut through the maze of rules and regulations that had become their stock in trade, his uncanny knack of identifying the central message of the scriptures that he had come to fulfill, in person, as God in the flesh. In the end, accepting Jesus and his message was a leap of faith that they couldn't take. They were threatened by Jesus, and they feared him, and people are never at their best when they're fearful. So they turned Jesus over to the Roman authorities to do the deed that they themselves lacked the courage to do.

The people in the crowd had to make their decisions too. They were faced with the option of following someone who exhibited no ambition to rule, who had mobilized no troops, who had no political strategy, someone, in other words, unlike any king or political leader they had ever experienced. So, whipped into a frenzy by their own disillusioned leaders, the crowds called for Jesus' crucifixion. "Crucify him!" they demanded of a craven Pilate. They didn't "get" servant leadership; they couldn't imagine a different kind of world, a world where the strong don't rule. They merely wanted to replace Roman power with their own. And how often have we seen those who were oppressed become eager oppressors once they have been empowered? Jesus was a different kind of king, as he told Pilate, and if Pilate didn't get it, neither did the crowd.

And speaking of Pilate, as desperate as he was to allow all responsibility for the execution of Jesus to devolve to others, Pilate also had to make his own decision. Ultimately, despite the tearful hand-washing and his pathetic attempt to blame others, it was Pilate who signed the death sentence. In the matter of deciding between life and death, there is no neutrality.

Even Jesus' disciples had to make their choice. Judas betrayed Jesus; Peter famously denied him three times, but all of the official twelve, all of his followers save a few faithful women, either betrayed him or ran away. In making the choice between faithfulness and saving their own necks, the men who had

followed him all chose to save their own necks, save poor Judas who ultimately couldn't live with the guilt.

And what about us? Well, there's no safe choice, no neutrality, for us either. Palm Sunday is a confusing day. In our calendar we call it Palm Sunday, which emphasizes the celebration of the crowds who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem. Or we call it Passion Sunday, which looks toward Jesus' tortured death on the cross. But we know that the Palms were but a misleading prelude to the passion, that the shouts of "Hosanna" would become calls to crucify Jesus. The hard thing about Palm or Passion Sunday is that we don't get to slink away into anonymity. Having seen Jesus, having witnessed his power over evil, having watched him open his arms to children, to the despised, to the vulnerable, to the excluded, having seen his agony and abandonment on the cross, we cannot lay claim to the luxury of indifference; we can't remain noncommittal.

So which is it, dear friends, palms or passion? Through which gate will we enter Jerusalem? Are we content with singing Jesus' praises as long as no sacrifice is involved? Or are we willing to go beyond the superficial praise and professions of allegiance of Palm Sunday? Are we willing to accompany Jesus in his passion? Are we willing to stay with the one who, as Paul says, became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross? Are we willing to remain with him at the foot of the cross?

Every year, every day, we have the choice. Palms or Passion? You decide. Amen.