

On Palm Sunday we always look back at Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Our reading today is a little long, so it won't be on the screen, but stand if you're able for the reading of God's word from Matthew 21:1-11 (read)

But there are several things we need to look at as we think about Palm Sunday.

The Problem of Palm Sunday –

As I already said, Palm Sunday has been described by Christians for generations as the “triumphal entry into Jerusalem.” But, have you ever asked yourself, “If this was a triumphal entry, then why did they crucify Jesus at the end of the week?” If this is such a glorious Sunday for all Christians, what goes wrong by Friday that Jesus will find himself betrayed by one of his own disciples, arrested by the high priest's guard, accused by nearly all of the of Jewish religious leaders, tried by the Roman governor, sentenced to death, and ultimately to die the death of a common criminal — death by crucifixion.

One thing that I enjoy about preparing sermons is the insights that I gain and the things that I learn as I research topics. For example, you might not know that Jesus' procession into Jerusalem was most likely not the only procession that Jerusalem saw that same day. In that same year, Roman historians record that the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, also led a procession of Roman cavalry and centurions into the city of Jerusalem. Pilate was governor of the region which included all Judea and Samaria, as well as some of the surrounding territory. As governor, Pilate was well aware of the standard practice for the Roman governor of a foreign territory to be in its capital for religious celebrations. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, a strange Jewish festival that the Romans allowed. The Romans were well aware of the history of the people they ruled over, so Pilate would have known that this festival celebrated the liberation of the Jews from another empire, the empire of Egypt. Because of the tradition, Pilate had to be in Jerusalem for Passover week, and would likely have been arriving pretty much the time as Jesus.

Imagine the spectacle of that entry. From the western side of the city, the opposite side from which Jesus enters, Pontius Pilate leads Roman soldiers on horseback and on foot. Each soldier was clad in leather armor polished to a high gloss. On each centurion's head, hammered helmets gleamed in the bright sunlight. At their sides, sheathed in their scabbards, were swords crafted from the hardest steel; and, in their hands, each centurion carried a spear or, if he was an archer, a bow with a quiver of arrows across his back. Drummers beat out the cadence for the march. This was no ordinary entry into Jerusalem. Ever since the Romans had occupied this land by defeating the Jews and deposing their king about 80 years before, uprisings were always in the air. The last major uprising, long before Pilate's time, had been in Jericho after the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC. After putting down the rebellion there, the Romans marched on Jerusalem. After pacifying the city, they crucified over 2,000 Jews who were accused of being part of the rebellion. The Romans had made their intolerance for rebellion well-known. And so, on this

occasion, Pilate had traveled with a contingent of Rome's finest from his preferred headquarters in Caesarea-by-the-Sea, to the stuffy, crowded, provincial capital of the Jews, Jerusalem.

The Temple would be the center of Passover activity.

Antonia's Fortress, the Roman garrison built adjacent to the Temple compound, would serve as a good vantage point from which to keep an eye on the Jews. Pilate's entry into Jerusalem was meant to send a message to the Jews, and to those who might be plotting against the empire of Rome. The spectacle each year was meant to remind the Jews of what had happened the last time a wide-scale uprising occurred. And, it was meant to intimidate the citizens of Jerusalem themselves, to think twice about joining any such rebellion, because it was destined to fail.

But I said this was a day of two processions, so let's get back to Jesus and his entry into Jerusalem. If Pilate's procession was meant as a show of military might and strength, Jesus' procession was meant to show the opposite. Both Matthew and Mark record Jesus's own

words, as he instructs his disciples to go in to the city and find a donkey tied up. They are told that if the owner asks what they're doing, they are to say that "the Lord needs it."

Then, Jesus quotes from Zechariah 9:5; "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

But, there is more to this passage than just a description of Jesus' means of transportation for that day. The prophet Zechariah is speaking to the nation. In Zechariah 9, the prophet reassures the people of Judah, that God has not forgotten them:

"But I will defend my house against marauding forces. Never again will an oppressor overrun my people, for now I am keeping watch. Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to

the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.”

In other words, Jesus’ quote from the prophet Zechariah reminded those who heard him of the entire passage. The message they heard was, “God will deliver the nation from the oppressor” — in this case, Rome. But also that the king they were seeking would come to them humbly, not on a powerful war horse, but on a slow-moving donkey, the symbol of a king who comes in peace.

The two processions could not be more different in the messages they conveyed. Pilate, leading Roman centurions, asserted the power and might of the empire of Rome, which crushes all who oppose it. Jesus, riding on a young donkey, embodied the peace and tranquility that God brings to His people.

Those who watched that day had to make a choice. They would either serve the god of this world, might and power; or they would choose to serve the king of a very different kind of kingdom, the kingdom of God.

But there is another problem. The Problem of Leadership.

In their book titled, Leadership on the Line, the authors

Marty Linsky and Ron Heifetz define leadership this way:

“Leadership is about disappointing your own people at a rate they can absorb.” And that is Jesus’ problem - his followers and others who get caught up in his entry into Jerusalem think they are choosing to follow Jesus. But by the end of the week, Jesus will have disappointed the crowd at a rate faster than they can stand. And because of this, they’ll turn on him. Even those closest to Jesus, the 12 disciples, will either betray him outright, or abandon him in confusion and fear.

It is interesting to note that the crowd on that Sunday, proclaimed, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” In other words, they were placing their faith in Jesus that he would restore the glory of the nation to its splendor when David ruled a united kingdom. That’s what the Jews wanted, after all. To be ruled by a man like David, a man so committed to God that the Old Testament prophets had proclaimed that the coming Messiah would sit on the throne of his father, David.

The Messiah would bring back the glory of Israel, would rid the nation of oppressors, would rule benevolently, and would be kind to the common people.

Jesus had challenged the rulers of Judea already. Not the Roman rulers, but the religious rulers. He had said to them that the Temple was not the only way to find God's forgiveness; and gone on to say that the Temple would be destroyed, with not one stone left on another.

Of course, those who made their living from the Temple like the scribes; the chief priest and his priests; the ruling council of the Sanhedrin; and, the religious parties, the Pharisees and the Sadducees... they would all lose their power and prestige if there was no temple, or even if the temple was no longer the only place where a person could be forgiven by God.

So, when Jesus miraculously saves the lame man by first saying, "Your sins are forgiven" and then healing him, he challenged the authority of the Temple system. And when Jesus drove the money-changers from the Temple, proclaiming that the Temple was to be a house of prayer for

all nations, but that the religious leaders had made it a den of thieves, Jesus exposed the corruption of the Temple tax, the scandalous monetary exchange rate, and the dishonesty of those who sold animals for sacrifice.

Jesus had disappointed and alienated the powerful people. He did so because the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the chief priest, the scribes, most of the Levitical priests, and others who ruled on Rome's behalf, were part of the same system of oppression and domination that Pilate was part of.

So, now we see - A Contrast of Kingdoms

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem may or may not have been planned to occur on the same day as Pilate's procession through the western gate of the city. Whether it was planned or not, the two processions provided a contrast that was unmistakable.

You see, Pilate claimed to serve a "Son of God", too. The late emperor Augustus, who ruled from 31 BC to 14 AD, was said to have been fathered by the god, Apollo, and conceived by his mother, Atia. Inscriptions referred to him as "son of

God,” “lord,” and even, “savior.” After his death, the legend had it that he was seen ascending into heaven, to take his place among the gods.

Augustus’ successor — Tiberias during Jesus’ life and ministry — also bore divine titles, and later in the first century the emperors would demand to not only be addressed as “God,” but to be worshipped as God also.

So, a contrast between kings and kingdoms was on display that day in Jerusalem. And, although many of the common people thought they sided with Jesus, they did so for the same reasons the Pharisees and others sided with Rome. They thought Jesus could do for them what Rome had done for their rulers — make their lives better, deliver them from the oppressive system under which they lived and worked, and turn the tables on the Romans.

But as the week goes on, it becomes clear that Jesus isn’t planning to overthrow the Roman government or the corrupt system. That’s why the crowd turns on Jesus by the end of the week. They don’t think he’s going to do any of those things. In fact, it appears that Jesus is going to make life

worse for them, not better. Their religious leaders, all of them, who never agree on anything, agree that Jesus is going to attract the attention of the Roman Empire, especially during Passover, and Rome will come down fast and hard on the entire nation. So, when Jesus is accused, when he is brought by Pilate before the angry mobs, they want to be rid of him. Jesus, in their minds, never did what they wanted him to do. He never defeated the Romans, he never dissolved the unfair tax system, he never put common people in charge of the government, and he never would.

To appease the crowds that swelled the city of Jerusalem, Pilate had the custom of releasing prisoners, many of whom were political prisoners. But on this last week in the life of Jesus, Pilate offers the crowd a choice between Barabbas, a known robber and murderer, and Jesus, a failed Messiah. Fearing that if Jesus were released, he would start all over again, the crowd begged for Barabbas to be released, and for Jesus to be executed. And not just by any means, “Crucify him” was the cry. Because crucifixion was the one form of capital punishment that would show Rome the Jews

were completely loyal, and would humiliate Jesus, even in death.

As we go into holy week, for one moment, ask yourself, “If I had been in Jerusalem that day, and had seen both processions passing by, which would I have chosen to follow?” Because, you see, that’s the choice we make each day. To choose power and might over service and love. To choose “the way things are done” over “the way God intends them to be.” Two processions. Two theologies. Two choices. Which would you choose? What kind of king do you expect? I pray that you would have chosen to follow Jesus. I pray that you have chosen to follow Jesus now. If not, today is the day and now is the time. The altar is open. If you have business you need to take care of with God, come and pray during the closing song. (Closing prayer)