

Which Procession Will You Choose?
A Sermon for Palm Sunday, March 31st, 2018

Readings: *The Last Week* by John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg; Mark 11:1 – 11

Has anyone really heard about the OTHER procession into Jerusalem? As we got a hint of in our first reading, the priest John Dominic Crossan and Protestant writer Marcus Borg reveal a vital but overlooked part of the famous story of Palm Sunday, which is remembered in the triumphal entry of Jesus and his followers into Jerusalem prior to his betrayal and death. The secret, which was not secret at all for anyone listening to Mark tell the story, was that this procession was an alternative, a mimicry, of another triumphal procession into Jerusalem that regularly occurred for the Jews during the High Holy Days festivals. Processional marches have an incredible effect on the psyche, for they serve two purposes: as a symbol, to proclaim a belief, to express an identity, or to demand something from their audience; and literally, to exert some kind of shift in their audience. Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea, regularly marched with his military into Jerusalem during the festival celebrations, and not because Rome was enthusiastic about Jewish holidays. His parade was both a symbolic display of Rome's power, and a physical demonstration that Rome was ready and available to exert that power over any who might resist it. In order to understand what this procession meant for Jews in this era, we have to go back several decades to get to where they were by this particular year. Remember Herod the Great, the one we hear about in the Christmas story? Well, his title came about because of the many architectural embellishments he ordered for the Jerusalem temple, but he was known amongst Jews not for his greatness but his monstrosities. Herod had been appointed King of the Jews by the Roman senate, ruling over this particular region known as Judea, and spent an inordinate amount of money to gild the temple and build impressive mansions for himself there in Jerusalem, where he ruled from. He was known for his pathological paranoia, distrusting everyone who worked under him, and put massive limitations on the powers of the priests and governors he appointed in order to maintain a stronghold over his region. By the time he died, his brutality, massive taxation and extortion of wealthy families had created pretty rocky conditions, and there were revolts protesting his reign throughout the region. The Roman Jewish historian Josephus writes in his *Antiquities* of Herod's despotic style of governance according to the grievances described. He reports: "Whereas, when he took the kingdom, it was in an extraordinary flourishing condition, he had filled the nation with the utmost degree of poverty. And when, upon unjust pretenses, he had slain any of the nobility, he took away their estates. And when he permitted any of them to live, he condemned them to the forfeiture of what they possessed."

Given this state of the union, it was no surprise that after Herod's death around 4 B.C.E., the kingdom rose up to resist another brutal reign; Josephus goes on to describe the tens of thousands of Jews who rioted, but the imperial government had only to deploy troops to the region to quell the uprisings. It was so bad that the military burned down the nearby city of Sephoris, just a few miles from Nazareth, capturing and enslaving the population of that city, and in order to create an example of what happens when you rise up against Rome, they crucified 2,000 people who defended themselves against the Roman legions. So it is that we enter into the new millennia with a destabilized, terrorized and impoverished kingdom, one that became increasingly precarious when, in 6 C.E., the Roman government removed Herod's son and successor and installed their own governors

from Rome. They continued their decades-long practice of appointing local leadership from the elite classes, and started putting them, after Herod, directly in the temple. If things were bad before, this added fuel to the fire by forcing a wider gap between the elite and peasant classes. It got very ethically sticky for the Jewish rulers, which in Mark's gospel we know as the "chief priests, scribes and elders," because each of these religious leaders were de facto political leaders, despite the many conflicts between Jewish and Roman law, and now the temple itself was becoming increasingly representative of the politics of Rome, rather than the politics of Torah. But against the recent history of Roman terrorism, how exactly were the Jews to survive this kind of tyranny without a gross compromise of their entire way of living? This is where Jesus took, so to speak, his last stand. Crossan and Borg, in their book *The Last Week*, examine what this meant for Jesus and his followers as they entered Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Crossan and Borg describe the whole governing system as a domination system, a type of governance common to pre-industrialized agrarian societies but still existing today. A domination system is characterized by three things: political oppression, economic exploitation, and religious legitimation. In other words, the political decisions were made by a select few, the majority of the wealth was created by the agricultural work of the laboring classes but went into the pockets of those select few, and the whole system was justified using religious language – a divinely-ordained ordering of society. Add on top of that, if you'll remember, the emperor himself was deified as a son of god. So for Jews who practiced radical monotheism as against the more common pagan traditions, the tension created by this demand by Rome to pay tribute to the emperor, both with money and with loyalty, would be a religio-political "perfect storm." This was the reality in which the Jewish people lived under Rome in the first century of the last millennia. This is the background against which Jesus took his stand because he had had enough. And this was the situation in which Rome would do anything it had to do in order to maintain its power when the people had had enough.

So we come back to the two processions into Jerusalem leading into the Passover celebration. On the western side of the city limits, a military parade begins, featuring Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, Idumea, and Samaria, entering the city triumphant, flanked by armed soldiers and cavalry. While he would have shown up for other holidays, the Passover was, from a Roman perspective, the most dangerous one – for the Passover was when the Jewish people celebrated God's deliverance years ago from their oppression under a previous empire – Egypt. It was a ritual reminder that the God of the Jews was not a God of empire. And their survival throughout history certainly pointed to a God who was not playing around. So here we have, on the eastern side of the city, Jesus and his followers, about to enter. Primarily Jews but even a few gentiles, they were connected by the common thread of where they were situated in society: laborers – farmers, carpenters, fishermen. As Mark tells us, Jesus asks two of his disciples to retrieve a young colt from a nearby village for him to ride on. Not a horse, not even a grown donkey, but a little colt that he would make his grand procession upon. So this was no abstract performance art that Jesus was creating – his followers and Mark's audience would have known that he was fulfilling an oracle from the prophet Zechariah, who proclaims salvation for the people from the enemy oppressors in the form of a new king who would create a just order of society, a king who is said to appear on a young colt: "Shout aloud, o daughter Jerusalem!" Zechariah proclaims in chapter 9, "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Jeremiah

then illustrates exactly what type of society this leader will create: "He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle-bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth." This is quite a contrast to the dominion of an empire claiming its power through the military might of conquest, the exercise of terrorism, and the resultant society that comes out of a domination system. This was the alternative kingdom that the prophets foretold, and the alternative realm that Jesus was politically demonstrating on this very important day. As Mark's narrative continues, the people spread their cloaks and palm branches upon the ground as a pathway for this alternative triumphal entry, but more importantly, they shouted, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" Hosanna in the highest heaven is major here, because *hosanna* meant – "save us." Hosanna, though we think of it as a shout of praise or jubilation, an expression of worship, for this crowd meant something more urgent. Something more embodied, something overtly political on such a day as this. The Hebrew word from which the Greek hosanna was taken, *hoshianah*, was used in prayers of petition; it was ritualized in the annual prayers sung in the Hoshanah Rabbah, the Last Days of Judgment, for Rosh Hashanah and the celebration of Sukkot. It came from the psalms as a plea to God meaning literally, "save, now!" Save us. NOW. Save us from this system of domination. Save us, from this economic strain. Save us from a regime that maintains its power by enslavement. Save us from a government that commands allegiance by responding to political dissent with execution. Save us from a despot who tells us we are free but uses our own leaders against us. Save us, they cried. Save us – now.

Although we are far from the military horrors enacted under Rome, it all feels a little too close to home, doesn't it? Our own neighbors in countries from El Salvador to Syria suffer horrors not that far removed from the terror of Rome, fleeing their countries for refuge in a land that purports to offer freedom and democracy, yet they find they are no safer, no more valued, and no more protected than they were under military dictatorships. Our own children are taking to the street to demand our government end the violence that we wreak upon each other. Our citizens of color are still being locked up and locked out of society at the highest rate in the world, and those who would represent our interests instead choose to collaborate with a modern-day Caesar, a swindler, a crook, a gangster. We are a diverse group of peoples living within a nation that wanted once to avoid the traps of oligarchy and the strain of autocracy...and yet we face a situation that has long been developing but has escalated into a way of governing that makes grandiose claims about its righteousness and exercises an assumed right to police not only its people but the rest of the world through threats, intimidation, and military terrorism. This is not the first time we have been asked as a people to bend the moral arc of this country's direction – but in an era where we have the technological capacity to destroy each other on a level that Rome would marvel at, we are called to action when the lives of the many depend upon the actions of the few. We are called to choose, both spiritually and physically, which procession we will march in. Crossan and Borg put it this way: "the archetypal pattern produced by Good Friday and Easter is both personal and political. As the climax of Holy Week and the story of Jesus, Good Friday and Easter address the fundamental human question, *What ails us?* Most of us feel the force of this question – something is not right. So

what ails us? Very compactly, egoism and injustice. And the two go together. We need personal transformation and political transformation.”

We need personal transformation *and* political transformation. We know what ails us. We know the effects of egoism and injustice, not only because our ancestors have lived it, but because we are still living it now. The kingdom of God, that alternative kingdom where chariots and war-horses will cease employment and the battle-bow shall be cut off, that alternative world governed by peace across the nations is not yet realized, but it is ours to usher in. Now is not only a ripe time, now is the only time to take our stand as Jesus did. “Hosanna,” we cry out, “Save us. *Now.*” Give us the courage, now, give us the wherewithal, now, give us the fortitude, now, to live out our personal and political transformation. Because if we do not actively choose which procession we will march in, Rome will. And it will not be the procession of justice. The procession of peace. The procession of love from which springs forth life abundant. And we will be left to answer – to God, to our children, and to the generations to come – we will be left to answer why we did not take our stand when it mattered most. As Crossan and Borg so exquisitely proclaim: “love is the soul of justice, and justice is the body, the flesh, of love.” So on this Palm Sunday, this Holy Week, this Passover honoring the God who actively works in history on behalf of the oppressed, let us each ask ourselves, how am I embodying the love of this alternative kingdom? Each and every day, let us ask ourselves, which procession will I choose?