



“Tenacious Love”
Scripture – Luke 19:29-42
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, March 20, 2016

Today we resist two temptations. The first is to be seduced into focusing only on the processional when Jesus and his followers entered Jerusalem to waving palms and cheering crowds. That makes it too convenient for those who skip Maundy Thursday and Good Friday to leap from triumph to triumph, completely bypassing the cross. Worse, it sidelines God from the pain of the world and turns the Christian faith into a cult focused on success and the hereafter but having no real bearing on the trials and sorrows of daily living.

The second temptation I want us to resist is to picture Palm Sunday as a giddy celebration highlighting Jesus’ quick rise to fame. That interpretation overlooks the fact that Jesus escalated an already tense political atmosphere to a near breaking point which set the stage for his death.

Although it would be easy to do, Palm Sunday is not the day to ignore suffering, to ignore injustice and to ignore evil, by claiming that it is all part of a divine plan that includes a happy ending. Let’s be clear. Palm Sunday sets in motion a series of events that lead to the execution of Jesus.

To set the scene, Jesus and his most committed followers have been walking toward Jerusalem for a few weeks. Jesus has timed their arrival in the Holy City to dovetail with the week of Passover when thousands of pilgrims jammed Jerusalem. Similar to Times Square on New Year’s Eve or Paris during the final stage of the Tour de France, Jerusalem is teeming with people who have filled all the hotels and B&Bs, and created long waits at every restaurant. Meeting up with friends and relatives, there were warm reunions and festive parties. After all, they had come to Jerusalem for the annual celebration of Passover – a time to remember God sending Moses to free their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. Jesus and his disciples could likely hear the clinking of glasses all over the city as the Hebrew people toasted their long ago exodus from Egypt. TO FREEDOM!

The Romans, who now occupied the land and kept the Hebrew people on a short leash, became nervous each Passover. Religious and political passions always ran at a fever pitch and the Romans – the current government holding the people in check – had to dispel any notion that the time was ripe for liberation, so extra troops were dispatched to beef up the occupying army.

Pilate was the Roman governor who ruled the territory that included Jerusalem. Each Passover he left his villa on the turquoise coast of the Mediterranean and marched into the city with additional soldiers to create an intimidating presence.

With the throngs pouring into Jerusalem, Jesus could have simply walked inconspicuously through one of the gates of the walled city. But shortly before reaching Jerusalem, he began to stage his entrance. He directed two of his disciples to secure a donkey, and then, beginning a couple of hundred yards from the gates of Jerusalem, Jesus begins to ride it.

What was Jesus up to? He had always walked everywhere he went. Why, now that he is entering Jerusalem, did he decide to ride?

Shortly before his entrance, Pilate had swaggered into the city as he did each year – either sitting on a mighty stallion or standing in a chariot pulled by a muscular steed. Troops marched alongside him to create a powerful show of force. With that intimidating image fresh in the minds of the people, he strolls Jesus on the back of a humble donkey. Rather than being surrounded by strong, disciplined soldiers, he is followed by fisherman, outcasts and widows. Rather than brandishing swords and spears, they waved palm branches. And they shouted over and over, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

King? Yes. A provocative and dangerous word. The people are shouting their allegiance not to Caesar, but to Jesus. The Pharisees fear that Pilate will get word of it and bring the power of Rome crushing down on the head of every Jew in the city. They rush to Jesus and demand that he shush his followers. But Jesus refuses to silence them, saying that if the people closed their mouths, the stones would shout the message.

After entering the city, Jesus went straight to the temple, and filled with righteous indignation, he flipped the tables of the moneychangers and drove out those who were buying and selling. He accused the temple leaders of turning God’s house of prayer into a den of robbers, because they were in collusion with the occupying Romans and skimming shekels off the poor.

Jesus clearly crossed the line. And his opponents struck back with a vengeance. Within days, he was arrested, accused of blasphemy by the chief priest and turned over to the Romans who label him an enemy of the empire. He was swiftly sentenced and by Friday he hung dead on a cross.

Why didn’t Jesus remain in the northern region of Galilee where he was hailed as a brilliant teacher, a remarkable healer and a charismatic leader? When he traveled from village to village, crowds would swell. The Galileans yearned to rub shoulders with this Spirit-filled man who enlightened their understanding of God, who showered them with grace, and who challenged them to commit to the path of justice and compassion.

Why did Jesus go to Jerusalem, the home turf of his adversaries? His love. His tenacious love for people made him a fierce opponent of injustice. His compassion for people ran so deep in his soul that it compelled him to lead a protest march in the seat of power.

Sometimes in life you just have to do what you have to do. Do you know what I mean?

One day people who are poor become visible to you and you *have* to feed them. You discover someone who is grieving the loss of a loved one and you *have* to visit her. A child is in danger of dropping out of school and you *have* to become his mentor. People are treated unjustly and you *have* to stand up for them.

Poet, Mary Oliver, writes, “One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began, though the voices around you kept shouting their bad advice — though the whole house began to tremble and you felt the old tug at your ankles. But you didn’t stop. You knew what you had to do.”¹

Jesus knew what he had to do. The oppression of the Roman occupation and the collaboration of the temple rulers compelled him to oppose injustice and to demonstrate the power of non-violent political protest. It was a courageous decision, and it cost him his life.

Theologian Douglas John Hall says that preaching the crucifixion of Jesus to 21st Century North Americans may be the most difficult thing a Protestant pastor is called to do. That's because there is a strong "tendency to stress the victory of the resurrection in such a way as to empty the cross [of its meaning]... The cross of Christ becomes little more than the necessary prelude to its overcoming."²

But, the death of Jesus is at the core of Christianity. The Apostle Paul did not write, "We proclaim Christ almighty superpower." He wrote, "We proclaim Christ crucified." He knew this contradicted everything people thought about God, so he wrote, "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." (1 Corinthians 1:23) Paul knew that a crucified messiah defied all expectations. But, he said, this is "the power of God and the wisdom of God."

The cross demonstrates the tenacious love of Jesus. He refuses to remain at a distance, untouched by the pain of the world. Jesus goes where there is suffering.

A colleague writes, "Jesus isn't tucked up in the sky, peering down from a safe distance: he's in the middle of a human train crash, the glass and wheels and rails and twisted metal all contorting his body and piercing his soul. If you ever look up to the sky and shout, 'Oh God, why?' you're looking in the wrong place. You need to be looking into the face of the crucified Jesus."³

When you witness pain, when you discover sadness, and when you encounter injustice, I hope you will be driven by a tenacious love to do what you have to do; and I pray you will have the courage to forge through the roadblocks. That's where God wants you to be. And, that is where you will find Christ.

NOTES

1. Mary Oliver, "The Journey."
2. Douglas John Hall, "Preaching the Cross in Our Context," *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2005.
3. Samuel Wells, "Preaching Crucifixion," *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2016.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Holy God,

Today we mark your Son's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. With shouts of "Hosanna," we join our voices with the crowds that welcomed him. We join them in singing praise to the one who comes in the name of the Lord. For Christ proclaims release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; he gives hope to the hopeless, heals the sick, and binds up the brokenhearted.

And yet we know the shouts of praise will fade away. By the end of the week, the same crowds who shouted, "Hosanna," will shout, "Crucify!" Our hearts break with these shouts, and with the pain and suffering that follow them. Help us, Eternal God, to make this journey with Jesus: from the streets of Jerusalem, to the upper room, to the garden, to the cross, and – ultimately – to the empty tomb. It is on this journey that we remember that you have suffered the depths of human pain, that you are present with us.

This, O God, is our hope ... During the days or weeks or months when we are lost in shadows and cannot see the

light of Eastern morn, we take comfort knowing you are with us in all things. So we lay before you the pain and suffering of our lives, knowing it is *never* too much for you to bear. We pray for those imprisoned by addiction or illness; those weighed down by loneliness or grief; those who know the pangs of hunger or who live in lands torn apart by violence. We lift up those in our community who mourn the loss of loved ones, as well as those around the world who grieve in the wake of tragedy. Be with the people of Ivory Coast and Turkey in the wake of violent attacks, and with the families of those lost in the plane crash in Russia. Breathe your Spirit of peace upon them, and draw them into your embrace.

Lord – enter our lives once again this day. Heal us, transform us, renew us. Draw us closer to you in this journey of Holy Week, empower us with strength and courage and with the assurance that you are with us in all things.

We pray in the name of Jesus our Savior, who taught us to pray: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be they name; Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.” Amen.