

“GOD MOVES... TO THE CROSS”

The Rev. Victor Kim

Luke 23:13-25, 32-43

(04-10-22) Palm Sunday

It all starts so promisingly. Jesus rides into Jerusalem and the crowds are lined up on the sides of the streets dozens deep, waving their palm branches, shouting their hosannas. I can picture it. I remember being in Jerusalem a few years back, standing on the Mount of Olives across the valley from the city walls and I can imagine Jesus entering the city, going down the valley and up the other side, going under the gates to the city, the crowds straining to get a glimpse. The whole city was in turmoil! **Hosanna! Hosanna to the son of David, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,** they shouted.

We call this the triumphal entry, and it must have seemed truly triumphant, **at least at first.** But something's not quite right, something's a little off. Instead of riding into the city on the back of a magnificent horse, an animal of victory as would befit the son of David, the Messiah, **Jesus sits a little too low, on the back of a donkey.** And he's not accompanied by troops or people of power, position or privilege, but rather by a ragged band of dirty, dusty, disciples. Fishermen, tax collectors, misfits, not quite what you would expect as the advisory team for the Messiah.

Soon enough, Jesus is betrayed by one of his inner circle, he's arrested, he's deserted by the rest of the disciples and he's brought before Pontius Pilate, the Roman appointed governor of Judea. Pilate sends him off to Herod, basically wanting to rid himself of this Jewish problem. But Herod and the religious authorities can get no satisfaction from Jesus so they mock him, ridicule him and send him back to Pilate, who alone has the power to condemn Jesus to death.

Pilate isn't so eager to sentence Jesus to death, but crowds have turned on Jesus. **Their cries of hosanna have turned to crucify.** Pilate offers to release Jesus as was the Roman custom at Passover, to release one prisoner to illustrate their respect for the Jewish holiday. But the religious authorities and the disillusioned crowd shouted out together, **“Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!”**

Barabbas. That's a name that's gotten a bit of a bad rap in Christian circles. He's the criminal who the mob chooses over Jesus. But if you read about what Barabbas has done you find out he's an insurrectionist, he's a revolutionary, fighting against the occupying Roman forces. He's also called a murderer, but you have to think about who is giving out the labels here. Is a Ukrainian who kills a Russian soldier a murderer or a hero? Is a suicide bomber who kills people a terrorist or a martyr? I suppose it could depend on which side you're on. The fact is that both Barabbas and Jesus are accused of the same crime, insurrection. Jesus could have defended himself before Pilate. He could have argued against the charges that were brought against him. It almost seems as if Pilate was looking for just one little excuse to let Jesus go. But Jesus wouldn't save himself, he wouldn't defend himself and in not saving himself, **he saves Barabbas. He gave Pilate no choice but to give the crowd what they demanded, that Jesus should be crucified.** It all seems so unnecessary. Again, we need some distance from **our** understanding of the story, from **this side** of the resurrection. We need to try to put ourselves in the sandals of those who were there when Jesus rode into town on the back of that donkey. **Jesus defies their expectations.** Don't forget, this is the same Jesus who gave sight to the blind and made the lame to walk. He turned water into wine and fed thousands with only a boy's lunch! This man calmed the storm, he walked on water, come on! **I mean the guy made a dead man live again!**

Why couldn't this Jesus just show Pilate what so many others witnessed? Why not show his power, his authority, **why not do what the crowds were expecting?**

And yet if you think about it, **nothing that Jesus did was expected.** Born in a stable to a young couple with no privilege. Surrounds himself with the dregs of society and calls them his disciples. It's like building a hockey team with people who can't skate!

Eventually Jesus is arrested, beaten, mocked, crucified. Crucifixion isn't just a form of execution, its reserved for enemies of the state. It's used to make a statement, to make an example of someone. Jesus is crucified to tell people, 'this is what happens to an insurrectionist.' This is what happens when you try to fight the power. Don't mess with those who benefit from the system in place otherwise you'll end up hanging from a tree at the edge of the city.

But Jesus didn't hang there on the cross alone. Two other criminals are crucified with him. One mocks Jesus, aren't you the Messiah? What kind of Messiah are you if you can't save us, you can't even save yourself! But the other criminal is a bit more cautious. Don't you fear God? Look, we're getting what we deserve, but this man, **he's done nothing wrong.**

But that's where the criminal is wrong. **Jesus has done everything wrong.** Ever since his public ministry began, Jesus has done the wrong thing. He's offended the powerful and the privileged. He's made the religious authorities fume at his seeming disregard for their rules. He's associated with all the wrong kinds of people, tax collectors, sinners, Gentiles. He tells stories that claim that the love of God is most especially with the marginalized, the poor, the outcast, those who don't belong. He calls out the hypocrisy in the leaders of his own people and makes enemies of the priests and scribes and the Pharisees. **You could not possibly have done more things wrong than Jesus did if you wanted to truly affect change... at least by our expectations.**

But if God met our expectations, if Jesus met our expectations, how small would the kingdom be?¹ Imagine if Jesus ended up being the king the people expected him to be. How long before his reign would come to a close, before his rule ended just like every other ruler before him? Even David and Solomon, as glorious as they were, their kingdom turned to dust, divided by internal strife, conquered by more powerful armies, just part of the temporary way of the human condition. **If Jesus met our expectations, what would make his kingdom any different from every other human kingdom?** Jesus had done everything wrong, at least by our expectations. And the cross, the humiliation of the crucifixion, well that's the last nail isn't it! Why does God move to the cross? Why does Jesus accept the horror of crucifixion when he could have avoided it? **Because a religion of the empire only serves the interests of the empire.**

Recently the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, added his voice to those calling for the expulsion of the Russian Orthodox Church from the World Council of Churches. The leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, has praised his country's armed forces for acting in line with the gospel and Christian teaching. Williams said, "the riot act has to be read. When a Church is actively supporting a war of aggression, failing to condemn nakedly obvious breaches in any kind of ethical conduct in wartime, then other Churches have the right to raise the question and challenge it, to say, unless you can say something effective about this, something recognizably Christian, we have to look again at your membership."²

¹ Jessica LaGrone, A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series, Lent 6 C

² *The Church Times*, April 10, 2022

Churches have too often served as chaplain to the empire. Our church is no different. Over our history, churches have defended slavery, we have given theological credence to the colonization of entire continents, **we have not recognized that those who don't share our faith are still created in God's image.** The church in Germany under the Nazis turned a blind eye to the atrocities committed against the powerless and oppressed. **When we do only what's expected, we run the real risk of forgetting what we are and who we follow. We follow a crucified saviour.** Jesus moves to the cross, intentionally, willingly, and what's more, **he calls us to follow him!** Jesus says if you want to be my disciples pick up your cross daily and follow me. **Jesus says to us, pick up your cross and follow me.** What's the word stuck in our throats, hosanna or crucify? What does it mean for us to follow a crucified Jesus? I suppose it might be different for each one of us. We're all unique creations of God and we all live with circumstances that are particular to each of us. **But I'll tell you what it doesn't mean.** To follow a crucified Jesus can't mean that we cozy up to whatever empire might be in power at the moment. It can't mean that we prioritize our welfare to the neglect of the welfare of others, especially those who are marginalized and ignored. To follow a Jesus who accepts the cross means that we can't make comfort, security and self-interest the pillars upon which to build our lives.

I think that if we are honest with ourselves, we know what the cross is that Jesus is calling us to pick up. The real question is whether we have the courage and the faith to stoop down and lift it up. **It doesn't have to weigh a ton; God isn't asking us to save the world. That's what Jesus does.** But God is inviting us to make a difference in our little corner of it. And God is inviting this congregation, RPC, to make a difference here where God has planted us. Nothing earth shattering, but something that makes a difference for someone or for some cause. Maybe it's feeding the hungry or sponsoring refugees. Maybe it's just making someone who never felt accepted in a church to feel welcome for the first time. Maybe it's to provide a place of refuge and care in a world that is so polarized and angry. **Whatever it is that God is calling us to do and be, it requires us to pick up our cross and follow Jesus.**

We know there's a lot that's wrong with our world at the moment. It would be good if Jesus were to reign now, here in this place. But as my former mentor would often say, **there's no crown without the cross and no throne without the thorns.** Resurrection is coming, triumph is coming. Yes, we know how it ends. But for now, God is still waiting, God's judgement and mercy are still in conversation, which is grace for us, for all of us.

For now, God calls us to follow the way of the one who moves to the cross, the way of the crucified one. At the end of the day, it's precisely **because** Jesus accepts crucifixion, **because** Jesus will not refuse the humiliation of the cross, that the possibility of something different is realized. Because the divine gives up his immortal life, our mortal human lives have been redeemed. Because God moves toward the cross, we are free to move again toward God. The path has been repaired by God. But that kind of reconciliation comes at high cost. **And we who are blessed by that gift can't only receive it, we have to do something with it.** No one gives a gift intending it to be put away, it's given with the intention to be used. I can't tell you what to do, how to use the gift you've received. But I do know that God intends us to use it, to live as a people of the king whose kingdom isn't limited by earthly boundaries of power or position or privilege, or even the boundaries of sin, darkness and death. The kingdom Jesus declares sets us free to serve, free to love, free to truly live with confidence. **We can't lose the love of God in Jesus. On the cross, Jesus has made sure of that. So there is nothing to be afraid of.**

My friends, we have been given an amazing gift, the gift of love and life in Christ, as a child of God, the people of God. In a world which is still too fraught with exclusion, oppression, marginalization and disenfranchisement, **we can do the expected and follow the safe path or we can follow Jesus.**

Thanks be to God, Amen!