

“THE BEGINNING OF THE END”

By Rev. Victor Kim

Matthew 21:1-11

(04-05-20) Palm Sunday

It's Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week, the most important week of the Christian calendar. We call the text we just read, the triumphal entry. But it's hardly that! I mean what's so triumphal about riding to your death, to a crucifixion? What's so great about being arrested, humiliated, betrayed, tortured and then hung on a cross to die, like a common criminal?

We call it the triumphal entry because we know that as Jesus enters Jerusalem, Easter lies just around the corner, that his entry into the city marks the beginning of a series of events that will change the world. But we need to be careful not to get ahead of ourselves, as if the events of Holy Week are just a prelude to resurrection, as if the betrayal, denial and suffering of Jesus isn't significant in light of the resurrection. If Palm Sunday is just about a parade, if it's only about a prelude to Easter, then we will have missed the point. Palm Sunday is far more than just a set up for Easter, it's the beginning of the hardest week of the year. It's the beginning of the end of Jesus' life. It's the beginning of the end to his ministry. The week that follows is chock full of betrayal, denial, rejection, humiliation, suffering and eventually crucifixion.

The prophet Zechariah wrote 500 years before Jesus, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! 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.”

At least the prophet got part of that right. Jesus did enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey, but triumphant and victorious, those would hardly be the appropriate words, given what we know.

In fact, if you really wanted to know what a triumphant and victorious entry would look like, consider the entry of Pontius Pilate into Jerusalem.

In a book called, "The Last Week," two modern theologians contrast this procession by the King of Peace into one end of Jerusalem at the same time that the Roman Empire's representative, Pontius Pilate, full of brute power, enters at the other end. Picture this: Pilate has arrived to "keep the peace" in the city during the turbulent time of Passover, when the crowds always get a little unruly. He travels with troops and flags and weapons, all the signs of empire, very impressive, of course. And he rides in on a magnificent warhorse, in case the flags and weapons and troops aren't a sufficiently intimidating display of power.

(Kate Huey, Into Jerusalem – Sermon Seeds)

That's what triumphant and victorious should look like. If you want to make an entrance as a king, you ride on a magnificent steed of battle, not a little runt donkey. You have troops with their swords and shields, their banners and their flags, process in front of you, not a rag tag bunch of nobodies, spreading cloaks on the road. Jesus gets it wrong and before you know it the choruses of hosannas have turned to cries of crucify. Pilate would have never put up with such nonsense. He would have rounded up any nay-sayers and had them put to the sword, now that's power, that's authority.

Jesus, on the other hand, won't even allow his followers to defend him, not even as he was being falsely arrested. It's the beginning of the end alright.

For the Priests and Pharisees, it was the end of a serious challenge to their religious authority. More and more of the masses had been following this rabble-rousing rabbi. And in the end when faced with the kingdom of God or the kingdom of Caesar, the religious authorities chose to put their faith in Caesar.

For Pilate and the governing elite, it was the end of a brewing possible threat to Roman control in Palestine. If Jesus could get so many people to follow him, from all walks of life, militant, separatist zealots and traitorous tax collector collaborators, if Jesus could get two people of such diametrically opposed philosophies to follow him, who's to say that he couldn't get more and more people to do the same? And after all, the priests had told Pilate that this Jesus claimed to be the king of the Jews! Pilate may have been sympathetic, but in the end, he would have shed no tears as he washed his hands of the whole affair. Just another pretender put down. Part of the dirty work of making sure the empire rolled along.

And so that was it. Power, authority, privilege and influence would win in the end.

Jesus was crushed by the collaboration of the religious, political and military powers of his time. He was put to death on the cross, as a rebel and as a criminal. The visible powers of the world had triumphed, and that was that. But of course, it wasn't.

No one at the time, not even the disciples, could have understood just how true it was that the events of Palm Sunday would trigger the beginning of the end. But what was ending wasn't what they had all thought, what was ending was an old way of being in the world. What was ending was the status quo that said that things like love and peace,

justice and truth wouldn't be able to stand against the powers and principalities of the world. What was ending was the belief that hate, manipulation and propaganda will always rule and that there is no place for weakness, for compassion and for sacrifice. What was ending was the idea that to fight power you need to have more power, that to succeed in the world what you need is more of what the world offers. But those who thought that Jesus would waltz into Jerusalem and use all his power to take his rightful kingship, they were about to be sorely disappointed.

Think about this for a moment.

Could the kingdom of God that Jesus had been preaching about have come about if Jesus had indeed entered into Jerusalem on a horse of war instead of a donkey of peace, if his followers would have been better armed than the Romans, if his disciples had been better political organizers or had more influence with the power brokers of the day?

Could the kingdom of God have come about with flawless, relentless, irresistible logic, a juggernaut of stream rolling counterarguments to flatten every objection? Or would that mental conquest be just as dominating as a military victory, reducing the kingdom of God to a kingdom of coercive stridency? What if what was ending was the validity of the human assumption that weakness cannot win out over strength and that it is better to conquer than to be conquered?

What if the only way for the kingdom of God to come in its truest form is through weakness and vulnerability, sacrifice and love? What if the truth Jesus died to teach us is that you conquer only by first being conquered? Is it possible that Jesus entered Jerusalem knowing what awaited him but doing so because he loved us so much,

because he wanted to expose the brutal violence and dark oppression of the powers and principalities of the world, so that having been exposed for what they are, we would be free to be able to reject them and to find room in our lives for the new, better ways of God and God's kingdom?

Jesus died, in the words of the apostle Paul, in weakness and foolishness, as a scandal, so that we would come to understand that the only way we can be powerful is through an astonishing vulnerability, that the only way we can live is by dying, and that the only way we can succeed is by failing by the world's measurement.

(Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*)

This week I read an article in the *Globe and Mail* newspaper that asked the question, "As Passover, Easter and Ramadan services are cancelled amid COVID-19, preachers wonder: Where is God in all this?"

It's certainly not only preachers that wonder where God is in all this. Anytime there's a natural disaster, a terrorist act, a horrifying act of violence, or a pandemic, people ask, where is God? Why would God allow this to happen, or if God does allow this to happen, he isn't a God that I would want to believe in. Some expect God to fix what's wrong, to do what we know is right, and why wouldn't you want to alleviate the suffering that the pandemic has brought on to the entire planet?

But we need to be careful because once God ends the pandemic, what's next?

Why wouldn't we want God to smite our enemies, to destroy our oppressors, except it's not always easy to define who the enemy or the oppressor is, it might depend on whose side you're on. A God who does what we want God to do, the way we want God to do

it, is, ultimately not a God we should want to worship because that God will likely be just an extension of us. There's a mystery to how God acts that is just not easy to penetrate, to comprehend. Why would God come into our existence as a baby born to a poor family in the dusty backwaters of the empire, then once he grows up, call a motley crew of losers and outcasts as his closest friends? Why didn't God choose to be born into the family of Caesar, or the High Priest or Pilate? Then the people would have listened.

Jesus could have chosen to show Pilate just how powerful he was, just call on the host of heaven to show just a little sign, just once. He could have ridden with Pilate together and entered Jerusalem. That's power, that's what the Messiah would do.

But a donkey?

Your only weapon is a chorus of hosannas against a garrison of centurions? We just don't get why God acts in the way God does! In our current Bible study, we've been reading the kingdom parables of Jesus from the 13th chapter of the gospel according to Matthew. We've been using a guide written by a catholic priest named Robert Farrar Capon and his book is called, "Parables of the Kingdom, Jesus' left-handed approach to a wrong-headed world." Not to belittle any left-handed people, but Capon's point is that there is direct, right-handed power, power like Pilate shows in riding into Jerusalem on a horse of war, backed by the full might of Rome. Then there's left-handed power, a mysterious, unexpected, unimagined power that comes out of nowhere, looking like nothing consequential, like a man riding a donkey, trailed by a bunch of nobodies, riding to his death, but in dying and being resurrected to life,

declaring a power that nothing in this world could even comprehend or conceive of. When people ask where is God in all this, they're looking for a right-handed answer, a direct power answer. But what we get is this left-handed answer, this mystery of sacrificial love, this weakness that is stronger than death. The answer to the question, where is God in all this, may not be obvious, may not be what we expect, but it's there, in mystery, in weakness, in suffering, in solidarity, in the shadows of the valleys of death, and it promises something more profound than just relief from our current problems, it promises resurrection.

The entry into Jerusalem was the beginning of the end. And it's still going on. Much of the world doesn't even know it yet. But we see signs of it everywhere. We see it in people like the front line health care workers who risk their own lives in trying to save the lives of others, in those who work tirelessly to keep our basic necessities on the store shelves so that we can try to live as normal as lives as possible, in those who still go to work in seniors' homes and care centres, who put themselves at risk so that those who cannot even be visited by their families, can still know compassion and care in their lives.

Jesus signalled the beginning of the end of the old way of life. He opened up the path of possibility and invites us to walk through. So, what about us, what about you and me? Can we think of where we have chosen to exercise our power and our dominion? where love and grace, compassion and mercy need to prevail? Can we believe that instead of power and dominion and control, God invites us to a vulnerability, to a weakness, to even being conquered so that love may ultimately conquer hate, so that hope may ultimately conquer despair and so that life may ultimately conquer death?

Do we need to repent of how we try to control our relationships and how often in the doing, we hurt those whom we love the most?

It's a long week coming up and for Jesus its going to get a lot worse before it gets better. But I'll tell you a little secret. Love wins out in the end; God wins out in the end.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the love of God embodied in the flesh, wins in the end.

And for the powers and principalities of the world, it is the beginning of the end.

Friends, at the beginning of this holiest of weeks, as we approach the cross and as we anticipate the empty tomb, may we know that for resurrection to happen, something must die and for it to happen in us, something must die in us. So may the love of God for us in Jesus his Son, signal the beginning of the end in us of all that keeps us from knowing and experiencing and embodying the kingdom of God, in us and through us.

And to God be the glory, now and forevermore, Amen.

*Written by Rev. Victor Kim and preached at Richmond Presbyterian Church on April 5, 2020 without members present due to Covid-19 pandemic.
Streamed online.*