

“Hope, Humility and Peace”
Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11;
Luke 19:28-44

Palm Sunday, April 14, 2019
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

Today we think about the nature of what we call Palm Sunday. It is a moment in which the disciples are expressing their hope in what and who Jesus might be.

What is hope? When we think about our hopes, what do we think about? One of the ways I think about hope is as an expectation of some good that we think will take place. We have some anticipation. We think there may be a promise in it that it will actually happen. We have hope.

The disciples are expressing their hope that Jesus will come into Jerusalem and change things. I think there's a bit of this desire for Jesus to come riding in, leading the charge with sword drawn. That is a bit of the image of laying down the cloaks and the palm branches so that Jesus can come in. It speaks to a hope that I think is still with us—a desire for a superhero to come in and change the way things are, to change the world. And yet, Jesus somehow breaks that mold. Instead of riding in on a great charger, he comes in on a donkey, or a colt. He comes in in this new way. In fact, in Matthew it says he comes in humble, riding on a donkey.

I have this desire for God to come and simply change the world, change the way things are. Yet, Jesus taught in Matthew 11:29, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.” That's a little different image than the military leader inviting a bunch of people to come follow him and join in this campaign, and lose their lives in the process. Jesus does not present himself as the one coming in on the charger.

The early church recognized this. They recognized that Christ teaches us to be humble and gentle, to bear with one another in love. There's that piece out of Philippians we read today about how we should be of one mind, have one goal, predicated on how and who Jesus was. Sometimes we think about how God made us in God's own image. I think there's a sense of wanting to be that image of God. Yet, the very one who is the image of God, Jesus, humbles himself by becoming human, becoming a servant.

As Jesus comes into Jerusalem amid the great hope of the disciples, he shows the great humility of coming as a human being. It is in that coming that he recognizes the struggle of humanity, the struggle to recognize their visitation by God, their struggle to see what makes for peace. This celebration followed by weeping is such a jarring piece to me. Jesus says that even if the disciples quit cheering, the stones themselves would shout with joy. Then, he sees Jerusalem. And he weeps. He weeps because he knows he is going to a place in which the power structures, the leaders of his people, have rejected him.

We can name a few of those. The Pharisees were those who thought they understood their religion as a way that they could form their society accordingly and make it pure. That meant throwing the Romans out, the Samaritans out, anybody out that didn't conform. It led, eventually, to an insurrection that meant the destruction of Jerusalem. That was one of the groups. You can hear the rivalry, even as Jesus was coming in, when the Pharisees

ask, "Tell them to be quiet. We're not ready to take on Rome." It's not that they don't want to take on Rome. They aren't ready to, and they don't see Jesus as their right leader. He's not quite what they want him to be.

The Sadducees don't see Jesus as quite what they want him to be either. Last week we saw this little piece of street theater that Jesus does in the Temple to suggest that the Temple is not being run correctly. The Sadducees are pretty happy with accommodating the Romans as long as the Romans allow them to run the Temple because it's a place of power and privilege for them. Those are the two main foils of Jesus. The last group, Rome, gets involved towards the end of this week, and is set as the background oppressor, and yet you begin to wonder where is the real oppression in this story.

In his coming, Jesus does confront all three of these systems of privilege and power. All three of these world views. All three of these ways describe human groups that had decided they know the right way. All three of these ways in which humility has been left behind. All three of these ways that leave a world of violence and oppression in their wake.

So what does Jesus do? Does he bring violence to change the violence that these systems press on the people that live in them? What does he do?

The contrast from the beginning to the end of this week is just incredible. Jesus comes and does not invite all his followers to take their swords out and follow him. He does not come and use all the power of God to change the world. Sometimes we can think Jesus is doing something a little odd. In a world in which we're supposed to fight, we're supposed to make the world different, Jesus comes and accepts the abuse and the violence himself, diffusing it. He very easily could have created an insurrection. But instead diffuses it. Instead he accepts the sins of the world on himself, not because he's guilty of anything, but because the world thinks that change is done through violence. And the world thinks it knows how to do it better than God does.

It leaves me thinking that I have a choice. Am I going to trust the ways of the world? Am I going to follow the way of violence, privilege, and power? Or do I begin to hear the invitation to humility, to simply being human, to being a follower of Christ, learning to serve and perhaps even give? Jesus even says, "Take up your cross and follow me," which continues to be one of those things I struggle with because that's not what I want to do. I've learned to be competitive. I've learned that I should be one who changes the world. I've learned to think that I should have things be certain ways. Jesus asks me to humble myself, not to think I have it all right, but to trust that God does. Whatever happens, I can trust that God will make it right. I can trust that God will lead us. I can trust that one day we will know the peace of God that goes beyond all understanding. Perhaps that's the beginning of learning what is the way of peace.

Palm Sunday is always this stark moment for me. It's a moment of celebration and a moment of sadness. It's a moment of decision. Do I just want what the world wants or can I trust God? Can I go into this week and go through the suffering with Jesus? Can I try to remember and hear what he asks—to be humble and gentle, to bear with one another in love, even if it means taking up my own cross? Amen.