

“From building empires to building peace”

Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 19:28-40 (April 10, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

Earlier this week, Lindsay and I were reading our morning devotion and came across this line: Over the course of our lives, the author said, we empty many things. We empty “bowls and cups, garbage cans and wheelbarrows, refrigerators, wallets Some of these things may feel good to empty: your dinner plate for example. But an emptied gas tank is not nearly as satisfying.”¹

We may not think of Palm Sunday as a day for *emptying*. Instead, we may think of it as *full* day. On Palm Sunday we march into the sanctuary waving our branches and singing hymns of praise. Like the crowds who gathered when Jesus first made his entry to Jerusalem. Our hearts are full of joy and thanksgiving, filled with high hopes for the days that lie ahead. “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! ... Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven.” Yes, it’s a wonderful day.



All through this Lenten season we’ve been looking at some contrasting themes: Our way versus God’s way. They aren’t always the same, you know. And we see that in our Gospel reading: A stark contrast between *our* way in the world and *God’s* way. Let’s look more closely at our passage.



Each of the Gospel writers presents this story in a slightly *different* way. Note that in this Gospel there is no mention of palm branches. Should we even call this Palm Sunday? Here, as in all the Gospels, the crowds lay their cloaks on the young donkey. And they spread them on the road in front of it as Jesus rides along the way. So maybe we should call it shirts and sweaters day!

There’s no mention of the word “Hosanna”, and no reference to the “Son of David” either. It’s thought that Luke may have been writing for a Gentile crowd. So those ancient Jewish references may not have been so meaningful. What *does* Luke say? He tells us that people hailed Jesus as their king. “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” But notice, this king is not of the nationalistic variety.



This morning we read this passage against the backdrop of some significant world events. I’m talking specifically about Ukraine, where we see military might on full display. Columns of tanks. The frightening sound of explosions. Cities laid waste, neighbourhoods flattened. People displaced, leaving homes and possessions behind to flee for safety.

Of course it’s not the first time we’ve witnessed such things. The people of Jerusalem were also a subjected people, ruled by



Photo by Manhhai, April 5, 2022.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/13476480@N07/51986156860/in/photostream/>

¹ Luther Seminary Lenten Devotional 2022, p.21.

the frightening power of an expansionist empire. The Romans held a tight grip on the city and surrounding countryside, even as they sucked the wealth and prosperity from it.

Around *this* time of year, however, the Romans grew nervous. Passover was a dangerous time for them. With crowds of Jewish citizens making the yearly pilgrimage to worship at the temple, they kept close watch on what was happening. There were always rebel movements seeking to throw off the yolk of their oppressors. And I guess they might have our sympathy.



What the gospels don't tell us was that another procession may have been taking place over on the other side of the city. As the population swelled with faithful pilgrims, the Romans would also send in reinforcements to keep everyone in line.



Imagine Pontius Pilate, governor of three provinces, entering Jerusalem at the head of a column. Here's how some have described it: "cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. "Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful."²

All of this display was designed to intimidate. It was a frightful demonstration of power. And a warning to any and all: Don't even imagine the possibility of freedom. This is how empires work. With power that imposes order and stifles dissent. It's the way of the world.



But consider now the way of Jesus. Imagine his little band of friends, paltry by comparison. The Lord makes his entry on a donkey, a lowly beast of burden, borrowed for the occasion. A young animal, ridden for the very first time. It's hardly the showpiece Pilate would have mounted. This was not some marching stallion. There were no chariots, no fighters, no spears, no weapons. Only the disciples' singing: "Blessed is the king," they cried, "who comes in the name of the Lord."



Some Pharisees standing nearby asked Jesus to tone it down. "Teacher, tell them to be quiet." They were frightened, probably, that the Romans would catch wind of this subversive talk. That the simple melody would waft over rooftops like smoke from a fire, and be noticed, and trigger some violent reaction. But Jesus refused to comply: "If these were silent, the very stones would cry out."

² Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week The Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem*, c. 2006, published by HarperSanFrancisco, p.3.

White house This is a king *unlike* the sorts of rulers we usually set our eyes upon: Flags and red carpets, medals and badges, trumpets and fanfares, secret service agents whispering into hidden microphones, black limousines with bulletproof glass, lines of diplomats ready to greet. There's none of that. Jesus' arrival happens in relative obscurity. The world's way and God's way are clearly two different things.



“Let the same mind be in *you* that was in Christ Jesus,” writes the apostle Paul, noting that Jesus *emptied* himself of any status and power that rightfully might have belonged to him. He gave that up to become one of us. He emptied himself, humbled himself, taking the form of a slave, obedient even to death.

And not just any death. But the suffering and humiliation of a cross. The cross was a favourite method employed by the Romans. Another way to keep the masses subdued.

There is a distinct downward trajectory to Christ's human incarnation. A giving up, a bending low. A life of humble service. It's a *very* different way. And this is what we see unfolding before us here on Palm Sunday.



There *is* power in it. But not the kind of power that empires like to capitalize on. Luke tells us “the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the “deeds of power” that they had seen.”

Deeds of power, you say? What could those possibly be? Is there something we have missed? Or is the power that Jesus brings so radically different from Pilate's grandiose display, that we have to learn some new way of seeing in order to recognize it? Deeds of power? Some translations use the word “miracle”. Now we're on more *familiar* ground, aren't we? The mighty deeds of Jesus were miracles he performed.

And what kinds of things were they? Things like this: food multiplied for the hungry, healing for those who were sick. Restoration for lepers and others who were stigmatized and kept at a distance. Forgiveness offered to those who were plainly undeserving. The bridging of seemingly insurmountable barriers that keep us apart: Male and female, Jew and gentile, slave and free – no distinction!



It's a long way from the battlefields of Ukraine. This is not death and destruction. It's the power to make peace. The power to give life, not take life away. The power wielded by Jesus throughout his ministry, even up to the very end, was the power to build a peaceable kingdom. Of all the gospel-writers, Luke is the one who sees this most clearly. 14 times he uses the biblical word for peace.

We read it near the beginning of the story, when the angels light up the night sky with an announcement: “Glory to God in the highest, and on peace on earth ...” (Luke 2:14) Peace! And later, after Jesus' entry to Jerusalem, he paused to look over the city. He wept at what he saw there: “If you had only recognized ... the things that make for peace! (Luke 19:42) It's so tragically sad.



In Hebrew the word is Shalom: Peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare and tranquility.³ It's not just an absence of conflict, but the gift of abundant *life*! And I mean for *everyone*.

God's way / our way – which of these appeals to you? I sometimes look away from television reports of the battlefield, because I can only bear to see so much. There are many who still carry the scars of such things. To their dying day it will be too painful for them to vocalize.

But the singing of *Jesus*' mighty works of power – those are not hard to vocalize at all! The disciples praise God for all that they have seen. And so do we. In the face of the world's horrors we will not keep silent. Indeed, like the stones, we *cannot*.

This Easter, perhaps more than others, we need to proclaim the gospel message, pointing faithfully, steadfastly, to the new life that comes from God in Christ. And we need to bear witness to the crucified One who reigns as Lord of heaven and earth.



And one more thing. We need to *live* this life by using whatever power we have in creative and life-giving ways. Any one of us can use power to build an empire. I don't mean the kinds that get expressed in nationhood. Though often we get caught up in that sort of thing as well, beating the drums of patriotism and cheering hollow political performance.

More often than not, however, the empires *we* build are much more modest affairs. Power-plays in the workplace and among our neighbours. Alliances, battles, not-so-friendly competitions. Even in the church: pushing our agendas, while riding rough-shod over others. In our families: one may try to lord it over others. Husband over wife, parents over children. Mutual respect takes a back seat to authoritarianism. And these ways are often very damaging.

This week I invite you to consider carefully the questions for reflection that are once again printed in the bulletin. Think of them in relation to your own life, and the opportunities God is giving to form a new way of being in the world. When we demonize others, when we label with stereotypes, when we're sucked into hostility and anger, when we stop trying to build relationship with others – *then* we are in danger of strengthening the walls of empire.

Our way versus *God's* way. I pray that we might have the mind of Christ – emptying ourselves, serving one another, even pouring out our lives for the building of a peaceable kingdom. In the name of Jesus, the King, our saviour. Amen.

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shalom>, Accessed April 9, 2022.