

March 25, 2018
National Presbyterian Church
“The Calm Before The Storm”
Luke 19:35-47; Mark 3:1-6
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The first Palm Sunday was a day of great celebration, a day of praise, a day in which people let go of their reserve, and glorified God with all of their hearts, declaring publicly, as Jesus came into Jerusalem, that here was the one they’d been hoping for! The Messiah promised in Holy Scripture! Here was God’s King with divine authority, the Savior of their lives and the hope of the world.

And, indeed, when they saw Jesus descending the Mt of Olives on a donkey, many were more convinced of this than ever.

While some expected God’s king to enter the Holy City on a horse with chariots and an army, it was the prophet Zechariah who had said that God’s King, the Messiah would be different: that a donkey would carry him and not a horse or chariot at all. (Zech. 9:9)

And so, some there that day were so convinced of Jesus’ Divine Authority as King, that they were unable to do anything else but sing his praises in the words of the psalms (Ps.118:26): “Hosanna.” “Hosanna!” (Which translated, means) “Lord save us!”

And in these moments the world was as it ought to be. BUT, as is often the case with such moments, this moment wouldn’t last for long; the celebration was short lived. It was like the calm before a storm; or like the music and the dancing on the decks of the Titanic in 1912, when people were oblivious to the fact that pain and suffering and death were waiting to pounce just round the corner.

And in fact, you could almost feel the tension rising as the procession came down the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley and up the other side of the hill into the city –

- Anger rising within Jesus’ enemies
- Anger that within a few days would be unleashed and directed against Jesus
- and Anger even in Jesus himself

In our passage in v. 47 of Luke 19, we’re given a hint of the anger of Jesus’ enemies – of the arrest and betrayal, and “fake news” about Jesus that would lead to his brutal crucifixion and death. We’re told that each day in the following week, while Jesus was teaching in the temple, “the chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people were looking for a way *to kill him.*” Not to silence him, or to counter him, but to KILL HIM!!

This was extraordinary – because what we know of the Judaism of the time is that one of the things the rabbis loved to do was argue! Strongly!

The primary book of what we call “Rabbinic Judaism” – the Mishnah – which was being pieced together at this time (it would take another 170 years to be completed!), shares with us one argument after another in excruciating detail about how to follow the will of God.

And as you read it, it’s clear that different Rabbis are in wildly different camps, and yet they all “live and let live.” They may get mad at each other, but they kiss and make up!

BUT not so with Jesus: He makes his enemies SO MAD, so angry, that they want to kill him!

But theirs is not the only anger in the story. It's not just Jesus' enemies who are angry it's Jesus himself – too!

In other words, the storm that erupts after the calm of Palm Sunday flows not just from the bad guys, but from the good guy: from Jesus himself – which is something we see as soon as the procession moves into Jerusalem and when Jesus first enters the temple, *where he gets furious* at what he sees:

People profiting from the 'business' side of religion, sitting at tables, trading animals for sacrifice, and exchanging the profane coins of the Roman Empire for the holy coinage that could be used to buy offerings for God – and all for a pretty profit.

And while Luke gives us hardly any details – the accounts in the other gospels fill in the picture. The next morning we find Jesus going back to the temple, making something like a fly swat – that he swings around creating a ruckus and turning over the tables of the traders and as he does so: he shouts verses of Scripture.

- From the prophet Isaiah (56:7) he says: **“My house will be a house of Prayer”**
- And then from the prophet Jeremiah: (7:11): **“but you have made it into a den of thieves and robbers.”**

Jesus is mad – he's angry – and not for the first time (as we read in Mark 3). He is not always gentle Jesus meek and mild. Some things in life make him angry – and rightly so.

And with HIS anger on this occasion, and with the anger of HIS ENEMIES, the peace and calm of the first Palm Sunday are over. The glimpse of “the world as it ought to be” on that first Palm Sunday is over. The heavenly calmness of Jesus' donkey ride doesn't last long! And before we know it, we're back in the real world: the world as it really IS with sin and suffering and selfishness and violence.

On the one hand, of course, this is desperately sad, and disappointing and disillusioning.

But, on the other hand, paradoxically, it's surely exactly where Jesus wants us to be:

- On the one hand, we need to be inspired by the vision of “the Palm Sunday ideal” – the Peace and Praise that, in God's good time, God will bring to pass forever.
- But on the other hand – in the meantime, we've been given a responsibility to bridge the gap between heaven and earth to do what we can to empower Jesus as THE KING, giving him permission to overturn whatever tables he wants to overturn in our world and lives: whatever tables we cling to that keep us back from being, and make us less than, what God wants us to be.

So what kinds of tables are we talking about? What do we see within the storms, within the anger, in both Jesus and his enemies, that gives us a hint as to what is wrong in the world, that we too need to face up to and, whenever possible, let Jesus change?

Well, what I'd suggest this morning is that most of the time the tables that need to be overturned have less to do with what we might call “blatant evil” than with motivations and allegiances deep within our lives to which, for the most part we are often blind.

Think, for example of the Chief Priests who became mad with Jesus for disrupting and challenging *the beliefs and power and security* of their lives. The Chief Priests along with a

religious/political group they belonged to, called the Sadducees, were the guardians of the most prominent institution in Israel: the Temple in Jerusalem.

The temple was a huge operation, spread over 36 acres (three times the size of our campus), and the Chief priests made their money from hundreds of thousands of people making pilgrimages to the Temple every year, and once there, buying the animal sacrifices to be offered to God. It was basically a monopoly in which they made big bucks – and would continue to do so as long as they maintained the peace of the Jewish people. In fact, for almost a hundred years the Romans occupiers had kept them in power, and kept the cash flowing, precisely because they'd kept the masses under control.

But, then, out of the blue – here comes Jesus – who has the ear of the crowd and the audacity to claim that He's Divine; that he has a hot line to God! And, at least on one occasion if not more, to claim that Jerusalem and its Temple were fast becoming obsolete as religious centers.

To them, he was outrageous, blasphemous, and dangerous – even though he wasn't the only one who opposed them.

The good folks down at Qumran – near the Dead Sea (what we call the Dead Sea Community) – opposed the chief priests and the Sadducees as well, declaring that the Chief Priests and their group were hypocrites and apostates, who'd sold their souls to the pagan Romans! And, declaring too, that the literal temple in Jerusalem and its leadership was under the judgment of God. BUT the Qumran folks weren't really a threat to the establishment priests in the same way that Jesus was. They had none of his charisma and none of his power to stir the crowd. And besides – they lived way out in the desert.

But here was Jesus, right in front of them, riding brazenly onto their turf, into the big city of Jerusalem, and his presence and teaching and power over the crowds was a “clear and present danger” to their religious authority and to the institution of the temple itself (which was the source of their income and wealth). So Jesus appeared to them to be a threat, and not just to them, but to the stability of the Roman Rule which kept them in power.

And in order to maintain those things – their beliefs, their wealth, their status, their self-esteem, their power – they reached the conclusion that if push came to shove, they'd be willing to push, shove AND kill, to keep what they had.

NOW – Let's make no mistake about it: undoubtedly, they thought that their anger and fury was from God; that they were doing the right thing – for God. Undoubtedly most of them would not have been described as evil, but as no better or worse than anyone else, just like the proverbial “quiet neighbor next door.” AND undoubtedly they were blind to the plethora of mixed motives that filled their minds

BUT FOR ALL THAT, in this moment of history, when Jesus pressed their buttons and the storm erupted after the calm, the fact is that they ended up on the **WRONG SIDE OF GOD!** Which means that the story of their anger needs to be a warning – a flashing red light – to ALL of us, warning us:

- Not to walk through life being naïve about the conflicting motives in our lives lying just beneath the surface.
- Not to walk through life without letting Christ the King dig deep into our souls, and no matter how painful, letting him place his finger on the places that hurt, which at first we

may want him to leave alone, but that he needs to touch and expose in order to heal. Especially those places and practices in our lives that we defend in the name of God, that may not be wrong in themselves, places that we may even treasure and value, because they give us a sense of purpose and self-esteem, and which may even provide our livelihood. BUT which are also in some way messed up, and which need, by God's grace, to be turned upside down, like the tables in the temple, for our own good, and the good of others.

Do you have a place like that? It can be deeply private, OR it may be public.

Some of you may have been at the march on reducing Gun Violence – yesterday downtown:

I wasn't there – and I don't have a political solution to offer, that balances the 2nd amendment, and mental health issues, and who knows what else, that's involved in the present epidemic of violence.

BUT what I do know is this – That *as a nation we can do better*. As a nation – death by shooting is almost 10-15 times more likely than in almost every nation across the Atlantic.

- Over 26,000 children and youth have been shot to death in our nation since 1999
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2018/03/23/more-than-26000-children-and-teens-have-been-killed-in-gun-violence-since-1999/?utm_term=.d6b0b41be96f
- and our black children are ten times more likely to be involved than white children
<http://abcnews.go.com/US/parkland-mass-shootings-children-wounded-killed-guns-daily/story?id=53197811>

If the statistics were reversed, I suspect we'd have dealt with this a long time ago.

- and not it's not only our children but our women who are dying – almost 50 a month are shot to death by men they think love them
FBI statistics: <https://everytownresearch.org/gun-violence-by-the-numbers/>

BUT surely we can do better *on both sides of the aisle*. We who as a nation, who have solved so many problems, how is it possible that we cannot do better here? Surely Jesus calls us to dig deep, to probe our deepest motivations and cherished beliefs and admit that something is profoundly wrong, and then build relationships with others – especially with those with whom we disagree, in order to preserve the greater good and the clear mandate of God to preserve life.

The Chief Priests and Sadducees thought they were doing the right thing – with Jesus! But their inner unexamined motives and commitments led them in the wrong direction. And in the end, they were found to be fighting NOT for God, but against God; NOT FOR the world as it ought to be – but against it!

So – the enemies of Jesus were angry and there's much to learn from their anger. **And so too with Jesus:** though the lesson is pretty much the same.

Remember how he ends the Palm Sunday Calm and Peace? – by marching into the temple, spouting Scripture from the prophets Isaiah (56:7) and Jeremiah (7:11), that the world “as it ought to be” is one in which God's house is to be a house of Prayer. But the world is not as it ought to be! Instead the world is one in which people have turned God's house “into a den of thieves and robbers.”

Actually the full quote – (in Mark's account) is

My house will be a house of Prayer for all the Gentiles – for all peoples, all races, all nations— but you have made it into a den of thieves and robbers.”

In formal English it all sounds quite holy. But if we were to translate Jesus' words into modern English, we'd hear Jesus saying something like this, that, "Your love of money and your racial bias, have become more important to you – than God himself."

Listen again to Jesus:

My house will be a house of Prayer
(a place where your relationship with God is real and powerful)
for all the Gentiles: (for people of every race and nation)
but you have made it into a den of thieves and robbers."
(your greed has won the day)

Of course – those who were at the center of Jesus anger would probably have denied it all. As if to say:

Go away! Leave us alone!

- *we're not greedy – just making a living*
- *we're not racist – we're just a notch-up from others*
- *we're not irreligious – we're helping grease the wheels of religion itself*

But the one who points the finger is the King, who and sees not only the outside but deep into the soul – and makes no mistake.

For the King:

- Religion that has no power to transform our relationship with people of all kinds makes him mad!
- Religion that has no power to transform our relationship with things – that become idols, makes him mad!
- Religion that fails to connect people with a God who is living and who longs to enter deep within our lives to heal us, to turn us inside out and upside down – if necessary; to bear whatever the cost may be – to him or us, makes him mad!

So the great crowd on that first Palm Sunday sang praises to Jesus when he came. They believed the Prophet Zechariah's word – that Jesus was a King!

Lo your king comes to you. Humble is he and riding on a donkey

Humble, yes! But still a king – A Powerful and Righteous King: God's King; the King of Kings, who longs to probe into our lives with authority in order to turn us upside down and inside out, and in the end to heal us.

It's sad in a way – that beyond the Palm Sunday calm there's always a storm, caused by the perniciousness and deceitfulness of human sin

BUT in the meantime – the King still reigns, and beyond the storm there's also a calm that only he can give, and that he gives to those who are brave enough to let him in to do his work

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