

St James United Church

Message for April 10, 2022

Palm Sunday

"The Rest of the Story"

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft



Readings: Luke 19:29-38; 19:41-44; 19:45-48; 20:1-8; 20:20-26; 21:1-4; 22:1-6; 22:14-15, 24-27, 22:39-44

I don't know if this was ever broadcast in Atlantic Canada, but when I lived on the Prairies there was a regular program on the local radio station called "The Rest of the Story". Narrated by Paul Harvey, it would showcase little known facts about a well known situation or person. It was cheesy but I liked it all the same, especially because it placed the story into its larger context, something that we often fail to do.

This is the case when it comes to bible stories like the one we just heard and to a degree re-enacted as we processed around the sanctuary. We like stories of triumph, making it tempting to focus on the joy of the crowd shouting "Hosanna" as Jesus rode to Jerusalem on a donkey, and then skip the rest of the story presented to us each year for Holy Week. It's an understandable impulse to go straight to the discovery of the empty tomb. I too find it difficult to hear the story of Jesus' suffering and death despite having heard it annually for at least forty-five years of my life.

Part of the difficulty for me is how Jesus' arrest and execution seem to come out of nowhere, the crowds turning quickly from chants of Hosanna to shouts of crucify him. Some preachers will claim that the people were fickle, turning on Jesus in just a few days. This is a tragic assumption because it tends to reinforce anti-Semitism. I don't need to tell you the outcome of that perennial prejudice. We need to avoid falling into such stereotypes if we're to nurture the harmony and peace I've preached about these last weeks. It is also scripturally inaccurate. Jesus wasn't arrested as soon as he entered Jerusalem. While there he spent much time in the Temple where he not only shared a vision of God's Reign of love but came into conflict with authorities who had a different view of God than Jesus did.

One thing to remember is that the gospels present less of a history of what unfolded than a reflection on its significance. Without this awareness, I will assume that the events, motivations,

even timeline, are accurate. Even though we commemorate Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem in Spring, the traditional time when palm branches were used as part of ritual festivities was the Feast of Sukkot, or Booths, held in the fall. This would put Jesus in Jerusalem for six months, a more reasonable time for the tide to turn. We also can't conflate a crowd of rural peasants acclaiming him as king with the city elite threatened by that claim, especially because palms were associated with the Maccabees, who two hundred years before had overcome the Greeks, and so had become a symbol of resistance against Rome.

I invite you to keep all of this in mind as you listen to some of the events that lead us from this day toward Good Friday and beyond that to Easter Sunday. I find that without these intervening stories, I will jump straight to Jesus' death, and interpret this as his whole reason for coming to Jerusalem, even the sole purpose of his life, rather than that he was crucified after a series of events that placed him in conflict with those in authority, including the Roman governor.

Consider what would have been on the minds of the Romans, the priestly council, his disciples, the crowd. Would they have considered his driving the moneychangers from the Temple an act of rebellion? What about his challenging the legal experts? What of his obvious "preference" for the poor? If these things happened a few days after his arrival, let alone over a period of months, we can see how they may have been a catalyst to his arrest. And if Jesus did arrive in the fall, then people may have viewed the Temple's "cleansing" as a hoped for first act of insurrection with a second act never to occur. Perhaps they felt disillusioned. That may explain the seeming "flip-flop". And what if, as some scholars believe, Judas Iscariot was part of the Sicarii, armed rebels opposed to Rome. Was his betrayal an attempt to bring about the rebellion?

It clearly didn't work. As the story unfolds, Jesus is faithful to God's Reign of love, modelling for us what that looks like, calling his disciples to focus on humble service, ready to lay down his life rather than fall into the trap of imperial thinking where might, not mercy, rules. As we hear the rest of the story, may we also hear his invitation for us to be as faithful, to trust that God's dream will always be harmony and peace, not conflict and war, despite how often we choose the latter. May the ever unfolding of God's Reign of love and service continue to be our hope, leading us to the promise of resurrection. Amen.