

Thy Will Be Done
Sermons for the Lenten Season

God's Will and Following Through
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Mark 11:1-11

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The biblical scholar Marcus Borg, who died three years ago, calls Jesus' actions on this day "a planned political demonstration" and, I think more accurately, "a counterdemonstration." We call this day Palm Sunday, include our children, and make it a rather sweet occasion. And it certainly is sweet seeing our children dressed in their Sunday best and processing with the palms. If we do our research, though, we discover that the first "Palm Sunday" was no sweet occasion. Jesus had a very important decision to make. He prayed, "Thy will be done." Now, would he follow through?

Dr. Borg, one of the great theologians of our generation, says that on this day two processions entered the holy city of Jerusalem. It was time for the Passover festival, when the Jewish people had to travel to Jerusalem. There throngs of pilgrims celebrated God's deliverance from the oppressive Egyptian Empire. God used his prophet Moses to say to the Egyptian Pharaoh, "Let my people go." You remember the story. After a series of plagues, including the death of the first born, which became the foundation for Passover, the Pharaoh finally relented, and God delivered the people from slavery.

Now, here is something we need to know about the first Palm Sunday. During the time of Jesus, the Jews were under the thumb of another oppressive government, the Roman Empire. As the Jewish people gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Passover, they connected the dots. Oppression by Egypt then, oppression by Rome now. God used a prophet to deliver them from one. Would God do the same again, and if so who would the prophet be? Passover had become a time of political unrest. People talked in the alleyways and outside the Temple. Groups gathered for meals and inevitably the conversations shifted to their Roman oppressors. At Passover, Jerusalem became a tinderbox, Borg says. Some Jewish radical

could have easily incited the people and created an enormous headache for Rome.

The gospels do not record this, but other historical documents do. On the day Jesus entered Jerusalem, the Roman governor—in this case Pontius Pilate—also rode into Jerusalem. Pilate came from the imperial city of Caesarea and was accompanied by military troops. They were an intimidation factor, there to reinforce Roman rule and deter possible Jewish rabble-rousers. Pilate entered from the west and symbolized the power of the Roman Empire.

Our text says that Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem from the east, from the Mount of Olives. Pilate rode into the city on a warhorse. Mark says that Jesus rode “a colt.” Some translations call it a donkey. Pilate was surrounded by military troops. Jesus was surrounded by common folks. Pilate had all the trappings of imperial power. Jesus had palm branches and cloaks to pave a dusty trail. Pilate obviously represented significant political and military power, but Jesus had something that Pilate didn’t have. Jesus had the hopes of the people. Hope for liberation. Hope for justice. Pilate was Roman. Jesus was Jewish. Pilate was the oppressor. Jesus...could Jesus be the liberator, the new Moses? The people became so excited they hailed Jesus as their “king.”

You can you see what’s happening here, can’t you? Jesus verses Pontius Pilate. The Kingdom of God verses the kingdom of Rome. Non-violence and peace verses military might and oppression. The people saw two arrivals to Jerusalem that day, two processions, and two contrasting visions. And surely they were wondering, “Could Jesus be God’s new Moses, coming to say again, ‘Let my people go.’”

Our text for today notes that Jesus and his disciples were on the outskirts of Jerusalem. They had made it almost to the Mount of Olives. I stood on the Mount of Olives once and looked across the Kidron Valley and the ancient cemetery there to the eastern side of the Old City of Jerusalem. From where I stood, I could have walked down to the Old City in less than an hour. Jesus was that close to Jerusalem, his destiny.

Jesus told two of his disciples to go to the village of Bethany, which was nearby, where they would find a colt. They were to bring the colt to

Jesus. If anyone questioned them, they were to say simply, “The Lord needs it.”

The two disciples went to Bethany and found the colt. Someone did question them, and they responded as instructed. Perhaps all this had been prearranged. Mark says they took the colt to Jesus, threw their cloaks over the back of the colt, and Jesus sat upon it. As he rode the short distance toward the city of Jerusalem, other people joined the procession. They too took off their cloaks and laid them on the trail to pave the way for Jesus. Others cut “leafy branches” from the fields and laid them on the path. As Jesus approached the main path down the Mount of Olives, a multitude gathered around him. The intensity was building. They loudly and joyfully praised God, saying of Jesus,

*Hosanna!
Blessed is the one who comes
in the name of the Lord!
Blessed is the coming kingdom
of our ancestor David!*

This was a wonderful occasion! Perhaps, just perhaps, their liberator, their new Moses, indeed had arrived!

Borg says that Jesus’ choice of a colt, a donkey, is significant. It had nothing to do with Jesus being tired and wanting to ride into Jerusalem rather than walk. It had nothing to do with elevating him so people could see him better. And it was not simply a matter of foreordained prophecy, as if it had to happen this way. Borg says that this was a prophetic act, a provocative action designed to make a statement. You may remember that the prophet Isaiah walked through the streets of Jerusalem naked for three years. It was a prophetic act, saying that the people of Israel would be carried off naked as the spoils of war. Jeremiah hid a linen waistcloth in the cleft of a rock where it spoiled. It too was a prophetic act, saying that the people of Israel were spoiled, good for nothing. Prophetic acts were an ancient form of street theater. Once the prophets got everyone’s attention, then they proclaimed their message.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey as a prophetic act. What was he saying? Jesus based this action on a passage from the prophet Zechariah (9:9-10), who said that a humble king would enter Jerusalem on the colt of a

donkey. He would be a king of peace, Zechariah said, who would banish chariots, warhorses and instruments of war. Zechariah said that he would command peace to the nations and to the ends of the earth.

Jesus rode the colt of a donkey, knowing that on the other side of town Pontius Pilate would be making a different statement. Pilate would represent imperial power, chariots, weapons, horses, and human oppression. Jesus' counter demonstration offered another way, the way of the Kingdom of God, which represented peace and human liberation.

As you can see, this was no sweet occasion. Jesus was drawing a line in the sand. Over here, he was saying, is the Kingdom of God. Over there is the kingdom of this world. Which will you choose? He was a man who knew who he was and what his calling was. He could have been the spark to ignite the tinderbox. He could have led them to war that day. But that wasn't his way. On this day Jesus was the model of the Kingdom of God, the New Moses. But with no plagues. No deaths of the first-born. No, this time the slaves would demand the death of the liberator.

Which would they choose? We know the answer, don't we? Jesus probably did too. Through the course of the week, those he came to liberate, those who hailed him as king, would turn against him. They would turn against him and the Kingdom of God.

That is why the Church has Lent, Dr. Borg says. Lent is about our repentance for continuing to choose the wrong way. We still choose the way of Pilate and Rome over the way of Jesus. Raw power and conquest over love and forgiveness. Triumphalism over humility. Oppression rather than genuine liberation.

Someone had to be the example. Someone had to raise the banner of God, regardless of the price he had to pay. "Thy will be done," he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. On this day he had to follow through.

Closing Prayer

Lord upon the donkey, help us to see clearly who you were and help us to choose you and your Kingdom. Amen.