

Faith and Power

Palm Sunday, April 5, 2009

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Texts: Isaiah 50.4-9a
Psalm 118.1-2, 19-29
Philippians 2.5-11
Mark 11.1-11

A few years ago, during Lent, I went with a church group to see Jesus Christ Superstar. It was a wonderful production. Afterwards many of us commented on how meaningful it was to watch this story enacted that we have heard so many times. One vivid image stood out for me from the production: watching one crowd entranced with Jesus' power – hanging on every word of Jesus as they welcomed him into the city with a King's fanfare only to watch another crowd in such short order cry out for his crucifixion. We look at them with some 2,000 years of hindsight and wonder how they could be so easily swept away and so very wrong. It all hinges on how you understand power.

We certainly live in a culture that stands in awe in the presence of power. We worship the people who can make things happen. That is primarily how we gauge power, whether it is a politician, celebrity, or entrepreneur. Can you take your ideas and translate them into action; can you take your vision and transform it into reality....even if by force. When the United States and the Soviet Union were at the height of the cold war this was precisely how we thought about power. The two super powers had enough nuclear armament to bomb their will into fruition. With that threat of brute force came power. In the days following the terrorist attacks on our country in 2001 people were anxious to begin military response. I remember the commentary so clearly. The United States had issued ultimatums after 9-11. If we did not follow through on those threats then we would lose face. The image of our power in the world would be in danger. The whole foreign policy of unilateralism is premised on these assumptions about the way in which threat and power operate.

In the midst of the Palm Sunday procession in the musical we watched during Lent, Jesus sings a song: "Neither you, Simon, nor the 50 thousand, nor the Romans, nor the Jews, nor Judas, nor the 12, nor the priests or the scribes, nor do Jerusalem herself – understand what power is – understand what glory is – understand at all." This is exactly what went wrong in

Jerusalem. Each of the gospels tells the story of Jesus entering into in city. In Luke 19:41, we read, "As Jesus came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'If you had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!' " When Mark tells this story he highlights in the processional itself this disconnect between the things that Jesus knows will make for peace and the expectations the crowds hold about what will make for peace.

Mark does this by showing the way in which in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was an intentional challenge to the ways in which the world (in his day and in ours) thinks about power and freedom and faith. When Jesus comes into Jerusalem he comes from the Mount of Olives, Mark tells us. This is a significant detail rooted in an Old Testament prophecy about the messiah. In book of Zechariah, chapter 14, we read that the Mount of Olives is the place associated with the final battle against the enemies of Israel in defense of Jerusalem.¹

There have been a number of books in recent years about this dynamic in Mark's gospel. The most popular is one by Borg and Crossan entitled *The Last Week*.² Ched Myers in his book *Binding the Strongman* makes the most compelling case that all the details Mark gives us about this procession into Jerusalem are designed to show that Jesus planned this event to be a demonstration.³ It didn't happen this way by chance but by design. Jesus draws on the prophetic material in intentional and paradoxical ways. He comes from the Mount of Olives which would evoke their expectations for a messiah who will bring defeat to their enemies and restoration of their freedom. But then he does not come to do battle, drawing from another place in Zechariah. Mark says that Jesus comes "humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey⁴." In fact, when he gets to Jerusalem nothing happens at all: he goes into the temple, looks around and then leaves. Myers goes so far as to say that Mark portrays this procession as a parody, like a piece of "street theater⁵" that was designed to expose their expectations for a triumphant military leader - someone to assume the throne of David and overthrow the tyranny of Rome by force and revolution. When Jesus came to do something very

¹ See Zechariah 14.4 and also 14.12.

² I read the chapter in Marcus Borg's book *Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006) which outlines his interpretation of Mark's account of the entry into Jerusalem. The book mentioned above is a full length book dealing exclusively with the last week of Jesus' ministry with special attention to the entry into Jerusalem. *The Last Week* has been extremely popular if Palm Sunday sermons quoting his text are any indication of such popularity.

³ Myers, Ched. *Binding the Strongman* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 290-296.

⁴ See Zechariah 9.9.

⁵ Myers, p. 295.

different this was to reveal the power of God which stands in stark contrast with the power of human beings.

Frederick Buechner, in his book entitled The Magnificent Defeat,⁶ describes this contrast in a very helpful way: “God’s power is not external like (human) power, but internal. By applying external pressure, I can make a person do what I want (that person) to do. This is (human power). But as for making (that person) be what I want them to be, without at the same time destroying their freedom, only love can make this happen. And love makes it happen not coercively, but by creating a situation in which, of our own free will, we want to be what love wants us to be. And because God’s love is un-coercive and treasures our freedom – if above all what God wants is our love, then we must be left free not to love - we are free to resist it, deny it, crucify it finally, which we do again and again.”⁷ Real power – Divine Power - has nothing to do with brute strength and it never includes force. True glory - Divine Glory - is not conditioned on approval ratings or image control.

We come on Palm Sunday and feel some satisfaction that Jesus for one moment received the kind of welcome and celebration of which he is worthy. We offer our songs of praise and enter with the crowds into this celebration of Jesus’ power. It is good that we are here and that we offer our songs of praise. But if we don’t continue to track the events that unfold between now and Easter then we will miss the moments of Jesus’ real power. They are found in each of his interactions with the various powers of his day. These are moments when he exerts the internal workings of God’s power: the power of love, the power of testimony and the power of persuasion. If you are looking for a spiritual practice for holy week, read the gospels that tell the stories and teachings of Jesus between his entry to Jerusalem on Sunday and his crucifixion on Friday. Embedded in these teachings and encounters Jesus exposes the corruption and collusion of the religious leaders, the misguided loyalties of his disciples, and the misplaced values of his culture. Jesus does not concern himself with what others think of him. He isn’t moved by the adulation of the crowds on Sunday any more than he is concerned about the waning support of the

⁶ Buechner, Frederick. *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: HarperCollins, 1966).

⁷ In discussion with some people after preaching this sermon, I want to make one distinction that perhaps challenges the language Buechner uses here. What I find compelling in this quote is the idea of God’s non-coercive tactics. I’m not sure that using the words *internal* power vs. *external* power is the best way to get at that. The power of love and persuasion is often embodied - it is acted out in tangible and physical ways and is therefore external. What it never does is use coercion or force.

crowds by Friday.⁸ He will not change his message when he feels the growing contempt from religious leaders, and he will not change course out of fear for what the power of Rome can do to him. This decision to follow in the ways of God is a decision to enter fully into the brokenness and sin of the world where powers clash and violence rules. Jesus does not turn: he knows what faithfulness requires of him and he does it - in *that* decision we see the power of God at work.

The question for us is: will we follow Jesus in this life of compassion and faithfulness? It's a pretty loaded question if faithfulness leads us to identify with those who suffer and challenge those with power. Faithfulness becomes a pretty risky endeavor when it is defined in those terms until we remember what sits at the center of our faith and what it is that Jesus reveals to us in this week of his passion: that is the unconditional love of God that cannot be broken. The shouts of praise that welcomed him into Jerusalem become a prophetic word for all of us who seek to follow Jesus. These words become a promise that God's blessing will inspire faith in us and that God's blessing will be discovered as we seek to live that life of faith.

Blessed **IS** the One who comes in the name of the Lord.

Amen.

⁸ A similar conversation after preaching this sermon would lead me now to correct my language in this sentence....it isn't that Jesus is unmoved by the praise of the crowds or their abrupt rejection of him as if Jesus were a Stoic of some kind. He is deeply moved by his relationships with people. What does not change is his commitment to stay the course. Perhaps a better way to say this sentence would be: He isn't *distracted* by the adulation of the crowds on Sunday any more than he is *deterred* by the waning support of the crowds by Friday.