

April 9, 2017

Palm Sunday Sermon: “Hope and Reality”

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Palm Sunday in other Christian circles is referred to as the Sunday of the Passion. Jesus week starts out with a high with his entry into Jerusalem, turns up the money changers tables in the temple the next day, has his last supper on Maundy Thursday and ends on the cross on Good Friday; certainly, a week of emotional highs and emotional lows. We’ve all had them.

Certainly, our search committee has lived through it the past few months with finding potential ministers they liked and then losing them to other churches.

Jerusalem in the era of Pontius Pilate was a city in great anxiety. Romans occupied and controlled all aspects of city life. A Roman legion patrolled the streets. Taxes and tribute went to the governor. The temple and Judaism was compromised by the relationship between Rome and the high priests. Anyone who wished to be anyone was a Roman sycophant; it was like a Washington with Lobbyists. Rumors circulated among the population that a Jew would rise-up and free them from their oppression. It was one of their prophecies. Throughout the history of the Jewish people a prophet would arise and bring them hope and a plan; a David or a Moses. People flocked to hear anyone who would offer salvation from their plight. According to the biblical story, the triumphant entry into Jerusalem was played like a political rally. Jesus sent an advanced team to

prepare the crowd. Part of that advanced team secured a donkey and her colt. There is real significance of the donkey and not a horse. Horses were seen as war symbols, whereas the donkey was much more humble and an animal who would carry burdens. So the image, Jesus portrayed was one of humility and not of war. It wasn't an image that would lift the burden of Rome from Jerusalem. Yet the people were ready to accept this prophet as a possible solution. Picture this scene, a lone man seated on a donkey and leading the donkey's colt while one person is leading the donkey. There's a crowd of about a dozen followers behind the donkey, individuals dedicated to this prophet and following him. These followers had been told by Jesus of the danger that awaited in Jerusalem. While going up to Jerusalem he told them that he would be handed up to the chief priests and scribes and that they would condemn him. But the followers were also thinking about what would happen to them entering into this city of intrigue. The crowd is cheering, and throwing Palm leaves and maybe flowers down in his path. Yet the crowd is excited, like a political rally or the red carpet entry at a movie opening. The crowd is numbers deep and everybody is straining and possibly pushing to see who this stranger is, who is this prophet, what has he brought us. Some had heard of his cousin, John the Baptist. He too was a prophet, he too promised some hope. The story does not attempt to state that Jesus spoke or communicated with the crowd, but the advanced team had spread the rumor that this prophet was long foretold in Jewish prophecy. He was connected to their ancestors; ancestors and freedom from bondage as before. Yet he is not part of the corrupt system that inhabits the Roman buildings

and the Jewish temple. He was an outsider, not part of the Jerusalem insiders, like John the Baptist, like a Hercules he was seen to come to clean the Aegean stables. Jesus party and Jesus were not as calm as the image they portrayed for the only creature that really knows where they are going this week was the donkey.

In our own lives, we watched and experienced similar events in political campaigns that I can recall; Obama's hope and change, England's BREXIT and the Make American Great again campaigns. At these times, many people were voicing dissatisfaction over the way their lives were being affected. In all three examples people were operating from their emotional side. They were looking for hope; hope that could change their current situation and lives. There were other prophets that it passed through Jerusalem, and people that put their hopes and trusts in them too. The people that heard about the incident the next day in the temple. Here this prophet attacked the money changers that were polluting the purity of their temple. The crowd that gathered at the gates of Jerusalem were looking for the person who would purify their city and their religion of those elements they held responsible for their plight. The crowd that gathered at the gates of Jerusalem was looking for a prophet who would challenge the lawyers and the priests in the temple. The people saw the leaders of the temple living in the luxury of the Romans and not helping them with their own lives.

People in the crowd would hear later that this Rabbi went to the temple and was teaching. And he was

approached by the chief priests and elders as he was teaching. They challenged his authority for teaching in the temple and not being one of them. And he would answer them with stories and parables and questions which they could not answer. He would ask them who do you think I am. And the crowd that met Jesus at the gates of Jerusalem would become caught between those leaders of the temple, and the new prophet who came to challenge them.

At the end of this week the crowd would have to choose between the new prophet and the Roman and Temple leaders that were the establishment. They would see that this prophet could not stand up to either Roman or Temple power. And the good Friday event would occur.

Last week my sermon was about imperfection, the imperfection of being human. But the story of Jesus entering into Jerusalem and his challenge to the Romans and to the temple leaders is about energy beyond humanness. From the gates of Jerusalem, Jesus was carrying more than his humanness, he was carrying the power of hope that the people had for a prophet that would free them from their squalid existence. We all carry some of its power; teachers, lawyers, physicians, politicians, congregational leaders and ministers all carry some of this power. Your new settled minister will carry some of this power of hope. Psychologically this is called projection. With this energy the person moves in your minds into a realm beyond humanness. The Jesus that passed through the gates of Jerusalem two millennia ago was more than human in the eyes of the crowd that threw palms

at his feet. He was carrying the God energy of hope and anything that detracted from that projection would make him look more flawed than humanly possible. In the beginning of the week the crowds put Jesus on a pedestal and at the end of the week they pushed him off. We readily see this same phenomenon among our public figures. Figures like athletes and the politicians we see on the small screen. Though we don't personally know these individuals we project on them qualities that are more than human. When their human flaws become evident, we reject them not for the humanness, but for the projection we see in them. We see them for not what they were able to accomplish, but for what they are not able to accomplish. Certainly, few in the crowd knew Jesus personally.

An acquaintance I met in Bethlehem Pennsylvania is an interesting example. Mike Guman was raised in Bethlehem Pennsylvania and went on to become an all-American halfback at Penn state, and then spent eight years with the Los Angeles Rams. I met him because he was the Oppenheimer fund representative when I was a stockbroker. He is an impressive man with two impressive careers. But what he is known for is the play that ESPN calls the #6 play in college football history between #1 Penn State and #2 Alabama in the Sugar Bowl. 35 years later he is still approached by fans who wish him to sign the front cover of Sports Illustrated with his picture of being stopped at the goal line by the Alabama defense. You can still see this famous play on you-tube. This led to Alabama winning the national title in 1979 and Penn State coming in second. The hopes of a generation of

Penn State fans were projected upon Mike, and he failed to meet that projection.

Likewise, the high emotional projection of the triumphant entry into Jerusalem the beginning of the week was countered by Jesus rejection by the people on Good Friday. It is seen in minor ways as the end of the honeymoon period. The time in a relationship when a projection gives place to reality. You will see this in the relationship to your new settled minister, when she or he will no longer be the projection of what you believed they were and become the reality they are. They would be as gentle with our projections as we are with our reality.

In an ever-evolving and never-ending world. Amen.

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