

# “Your King Is Coming”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – April 5, 2009*

Palm / Passion Sunday

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Rev. John Wahl

John 12:12-16

The people watching and participating in the palm procession do everything that a victorious military leader would have come to expect. They line the streets, they place their clothes in his path, they wave their palms; and they shout out “Hosanna!” which means “save us now.”

There is a reason that the gospel stories of the palm parade are filled with military overtones. Strength in Roman times was measured in terms of conquest, and many of the Jewish people in the crowds that day were hoping and praying for a mighty king who would overthrow the regime.

But Jesus chose instead to ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey that was not yet even full-grown; and yes, his feet likely would have dragged on the ground. He sent his disciples ahead with instructions to get an animal that signified peace and not war; not a majestic white horse, but a small, simple donkey. In choosing this almost comical mode of transportation, Jesus was lampooning the establishment; resisting the temptation offered to him to become a worldly king; unmasking the “powers that be” for who they really were: not a government for the people, but a government and society propped up by the tools of violence and oppression.<sup>1</sup>

Just this week, we have heard about deadly shootings in Binghamton, New York, Pittsburgh and yesterday in Washington State. Even two-thousand years later, violence and tragedy is not far from us or those we know. One of my college roommates used to be on the police force in Binghamton. He told me this week about some of his friends who are still policemen there. In an email, he summed up his feelings about what happened in his hometown by writing, “it just stinks,” or words to that effect.

Violence is never far from us. When we retell the story of the Palm procession, we do so knowing what would happen to Jesus in the coming week. It is no accident that all four gospels tell this story, and recount in detail all the events of Holy Week: Jesus teaching in the Temple; the plots of the Jewish leaders to have him arrested; the final meal with the disciples, praying in the garden of Gethsemane; the arrest and trial, the crucifixion; and the flight of the fearful disciples – all before arriving at the miracle of resurrection on Easter morning. And it is no accident that here, in John’s gospel, we are reminded that the disciples did not – and could not – understand these events going on in their midst until the story was complete.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Campbell in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 2

How could they understand? The world is so filled with violence; so seemingly controlled by the powers of evil that we often fail to comprehend what Jesus meant when he said, at the outset of his ministry, that the Kingdom of God was at hand; that the words of the Old Testament foretelling an end to the reign of violence were now being fulfilled in him. With the war in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, the war in the Middle East, the war against drugs, the war against terror, the war on poverty, we are surrounded by both the language and the reality of violence.

But, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey colt – the symbol of peace. He chose not to escape violence, but to unmask its power over the world. The Kingdom which he announced and ushered in was not one of might-makes-right power but one which God has planned since the beginning of time. When will it truly come to pass? Some claim that they know, but Jesus says no-one actually does, only the Father.

Tony Campolo offers this analogy:

*Suppose you are in France, and it is early 1944. Most of the country is occupied by the Nazi army. The Resistance is sabotaging German operations here and there, enough to disrupt and distract, but never enough to actually drive Hitler's forces out of France. What rifles and explosives have been smuggled to the Underground are nothing compared to the artillery and tanks of the Germans.*

*Looking only at the continent, seeing only a handful of ragged saboteurs armed with little more than determination and a willingness to die for their country – knowing only this, you would have no idea that at that moment across the English Channel, there was being assembled the most massive invasion force in human history. And that within only a few months, the signal would be given to launch that force. And that shortly after that, Allied soldiers would finish what the French Resistance had started, and drive the Nazis out of France once and for all.*

And here is what Campolo concludes:

*So it will be with God's people. Even as you and I struggle to take very small steps in creating the Kingdom of God in the here and now, a huge invasion force is being gathered beyond the clouds. And, at an unexpected moment in history, a trumpet will sound, and Jesus will return with a mighty army to overthrow the evils of this present age. On that day, Jesus will join our limited efforts and carry us to victory. Then justice will roll down like mighty waters and the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our God, and God shall reign forever and ever.<sup>2</sup>*

Like the disciples and the crowds that gathered on Palm Sunday, we have only a limited understanding. Like them, we have only the language of warfare to describe what God will one day accomplish in our midst. But if we think that the same Jesus who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, with his feet dragging in the dust, will return with a violent sword, something has gone wrong in our translation.

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<sup>2</sup> Tony Campolo (& Brian McClaren), *Adventures in Missing the Point*

We may not be able to create the Kingdom of God in its fullness prior to Christ's return, yet we are nonetheless called by God to work toward that end. We may or may not accomplish the elimination of poverty, but we can feed the hungry. We may not be able to set free everyone held captive – physically, emotionally or spiritually – but we can visit the imprisoned and proclaim the good news to those who are not yet free.

Today, Christ offers us a seat at his table in order to give us foretaste of the great banquet that is to come. To whatever extent you are filled by the participation in this feast, you are also called to remember who provided these elements for you – the bread and the cup – and also that many others are not filled to fullness, and do not experience a cup that overflows. And so, sisters and brothers, let us be thankful, but let us not forget the “giving” part of “thanksgiving.” Your king is coming. Let us do all that we can to make all things ready. AMEN.