

Palm Sunday 2022
Sermon 4.10.22
Scripture:

Isaiah 50:4-9

The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backwards. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

Luke 19:28-40

And when he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ When he drew near to Beth'phage and Bethany, at the mount that is called Olivet, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰ saying, "Go into the village opposite, where on entering you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever yet sat; untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' you shall say this, 'The Lord has need of it.'" ³² So those who were sent went away and found it as he had told them. ³³ And as they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴ And they said, "The Lord has need of it." ³⁵ And they brought it to Jesus, and throwing their garments on the colt they set Jesus upon it. ³⁶ And as he rode along, they spread their garments on the road. ³⁷ As he was now drawing near, at the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, ³⁸ saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" ³⁹ And some of the Pharisees in the multitude said to him, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples." ⁴⁰ He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out." (415)

There's a parable I've been thinking about lately as Putin's war rages on. It's only in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus asking, "Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace." What king would do this, Jesus asks. What king would go up against an enemy that had the means, or the will, to win?

A rhetorical question, its implied answer is that no king would do that.

No king, but Putin, I always think. He miscalculated, if he calculated at all. He's come to this stupid, meaningless war, after all, from an isolated place, which isn't like him. It hasn't always been the case that he's so isolated. It seems, unlike a lot of global leaders, Putin rules more like a mob boss, always surrounded by his buddies, his club of thugs and kleptocrats.

So say Fiona Hill and Masha Gessen, two people always worth listening to, but especially when it comes to post-Soviet Russia and Vladimir Putin.

The pandemic changed Putin's ways, though. As for all of us, COVID isolation has had a warping effect on him, an intensifying effect. So frightened of contracting the virus, Putin has been more utterly alone than most people on earth, many of us though having spent much of these last two years utterly alone.

He is someone whom (I gather) has never been loved, has never been attached to anything but ideology and survival and his own bitter resentments, and who's Soviet-cultivated paranoia has found new fuel in this pandemic virus whose ways are mysterious and pervasive and possibly deadly. This has him in close contact with but his bodyguards, a group in number you could count on one hand and who aren't exactly up to date on geopolitics, are more yes-men than even the most obsequious yes-men.

For all this, he grossly underestimated what he as up against in Ukraine.

It will make for a war which—protracted, increasingly nihilistic—no one will win, everyone will just bitterly lose.

We root for Ukraine to fight, to fight. But we do this knowing, we *must* do this knowing, that to root for such a thing is to succumb to the ways of the world, to surrender any hope that the way of the King of Peace has any relevance here at all.

We're faithful, sure, I mean sort of: we're not *fools*.

An old Ukrainian woman baked a cake for Russian soldiers, baited them with it. Knowing they'd arrive hungry in her city, she left it out for them. She baked poison into it. The soldiers all ate it and died.

"Good for her," said Twitter.

"Is it wrong," one person tweeted, "that I think this woman is awesome?"

Yes, it's wrong, was my thought.

Not that I didn't feel a certain glee as well. I mean, what choice did she have? It was either her or them. Who wouldn't choose the former?

Who wouldn't choose survival for yourself?

Immediately following Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, Jesus will weep. He will weep for the city because he has come as a King who offers a way for peace, but the city will reject him, will instead pursue war against a power that has them way outgunned. Rome was coming, Judea would fight, and it would leave them gutted, eviscerated; would scatter them into the hills, a new exile, a

forever diaspora, never fully to recover as a people. They would do this out of ignorance, or belligerence, or resentment that they weren't getting the respect they thought they deserved. Grudges decades long that they were always suffering a humiliating defeat. Grudges centuries old that long past glory had never been presently resurrected so to be enjoyed again.

And on it would go.

And on it will go.

And it would be called history. And it will be tragic.

Luke's version of the story that gives us Palm Sunday doesn't give us palms or even cut branches, doesn't give us triumphalism, not even ironic triumphalism. Others do. In the telling of this event, which all four gospels do indeed tell of, there's more sense of triumphalism in the other three, if ironic triumphalism. Jesus' entry into the city is to evoke the manner of other kings entering the city—but to do so mockingly. Jesus was trolling the powers-that-be, baiting them “Look how *fancy* you all are. It's impressive.

“No, really, it's *impressive*.”

Well, if Jesus wasn't quite the sarcastic Gen X-er that I am, he was perhaps laying out a contrast by way of irony: which parade would you like to join in life? Would you like the one of earthly power, military might, the dealing and delaying of death? Or would you like one of human relationship, healing love, the embrace and transcending of death?

Irony, though, isn't the most satisfying thing to hear on Palm Sunday, not when our celebrations tend to take it straight. We wave palms. We sing songs that mention children singing songs—though there's no mention of children in any of gospels' take on this. It's a mid-century American, mainline Protestant church take on it all, a pre-Easter Easter. And people like it. And they should. It's pleasant. But it's not much in reference to the event itself, or to any of the takes on the event itself.

Less still for Luke's take on it—where there are no “hosannas,” no general multitude, just Jesus' disciples rejoicing and praising God with a loud voice, saying, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” Granted, they were loud enough to get a rebuke from the Pharisees. But it seems there were always Pharisees in the mix with them, and they were often scolding, though seldom really challenging.

What's more, there's no sense that others besides the disciples joined in. There's no sense that those of this group praising God would become members of the crowd at the end of the week demanding about Jesus that Herod crucify him, crucify him.

No, this is a small, discrete crowd of those who'd followed Jesus and would continue to do so. In some cases, they'd run away at the end of the week. But in those cases, there's reason to believe they'd be back. Really, for the most part, these people were faithful to the walk of discipleship, and would continue to be so as the early church.

Luke has a lot of faith in the church. Luke presents Jesus as having a lot of faith in the church, and of being deeply, urgently disappointed when people don't join up with the movement of the church. And I don't mean the church as a religious organization, but as a people with a very specific task to do, a people with a very specific *mode* of being in the world. It is the mode of peace. It's in acceptant of this Prince of Peace to be their King. This is a deeply, urgently pressing matter, a pressing decision before us each and all. Indeed, Luke's gospel gets intimidating, gets scary, around the question of whether we'll *do* this, or we won't.

And again, it's not a matter of religious rectitude. It's not a matter of choosing the right religion so we get into heaven. It's a matter of committing to the way of peace so we can live as if heaven were now. It's a question of how many people will die, how much they will suffer, how deeply the creation will groan as it all rotates 'round the sun, rather than how loftily and wondrously it will dance its circuits toward its aim of glory and restoration and fulfillment for all creation, an exultation that, if we don't shout it forth, the very rocks will—for this salvation is intended for all creation, its very warp and weft, its very fundamentals and every filigree.

Will we surrender to the Lord's reign of peace and life? Or will we not?

That's the only question here.

And this means bake the cake and leave out the poison.

I sometimes get the feeling Jesus doesn't fully appreciate how difficult it is, what he's asking us to do, how he's asking us to be. How *impossible* it is.

Mercifully, he'll blame it on ignorance: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Ignorance is a better motivation than malice, I suppose.

I chalk it up to fear as well. I don't want to die; I *fear* the possible pain of it. I'd fear the likely pain of dying at Putin's hand, or any of this ilk.

I wouldn't want to get crucified; I would *fear* it.

And yet here we are.

Luke Timothy Johnson, a Bible scholar with whom we'll spend time this spring in the book club, writes of Jesus' weeping, which follows the event we celebrate on Palm Sunday: "This lament provides an authoritative commentary (by Jesus himself) on the significance of his arrival in the

city, and a reminder of [Luke's] important literary themes: Jesus' arrival is the visitation of God that offers peace; the rejection of the Prophet will lead to destruction; this first rejection is carried out in ignorance. We are reminded of the parable about the king who 'sued for peace,' because he recognized that he was being attacked by a superior force; Jerusalem lacks this recognition, and so faces destruction.'"

Accurate, a succinct reading of this gospel, a reading which *I've* resisted since we started it last winter, it all sounds simple enough.

Simple. Just make the right choice. Just don't reject this Prophet, this king whose reign is peace.

Simple.

But to say something is simple isn't to say it's easy.

Which means it takes practice.

Which is why we're here.

When Jack was little, maybe in the 1st grade, we were walking with a little friend of his and that friend's dad, walking from the school over to where I'd parked my car across the street, over to where his friend lived.

They were chattering as little kids do. Jack mentioned church and asked his friend if he goes to church.

"No," his friend said. "I'm good."

I glanced at the friend's dad to see if he'd overheard.

His crestfallen face indicated that he had. He knows what I do for a living. Everyone does—and it's top of mind for some people whenever they interact with me.

"That's just about the best reason I've ever heard," I reassured the dad—because church isn't for people who are good, it's for people who aren't good, and who know it, and who'd really to be.

We also might wish that to be good wouldn't entail what it apparently does in a world whose overall mode isn't good, is indeed sometimes downright malicious, calculating, vicious, cruel; or just ignorant, reckless, utterly mistaken.

I'm sorry to say it does entail these things—a laying down of arms, a reaching out for terms of peace, a leaving out the poison in the hope that the sweet cake will win someone's desire for more sweet cake along with good company with whom to enjoy it in fullness and peace; or does

entail at least running away, resisting a fight. I'm sorry to say being good does entail these things. I'm sorry to say living in embrace of Jesus as our king does indeed entail these things.

It's simple. It's difficult. And I'm reassured to say redemption is real, which makes it so there's hope even for cowards like us, cowards like—working up the courage, working up the courage.

We're headed to the cross.

Jesus will hang from it.

Thanks be to God.