

Sometimes You Have to Choose  
Palm Sunday 2023  
Sermon written and delivered by the Rev. Kristine A. Johnson

Hosanna to the Son of David!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!

It may sound like “hosanna!” is the Palm Sunday version of the A word we will use next week on Easter. The crowds lining Jesus’ path throw down their cloaks, acknowledging Jesus’ kingship. They wave palm branches, evoking a liturgical procession to the temple. These people have felt Jesus’ healing power. They have heard his promises that God’s reign is near. Their hopes are high as he enters Jerusalem – is he going to claim David’s throne once and for all?

But “hosanna” is not a cry of praise; it is a prayer for deliverance. The tone is as much desperate as it is joyous. At the same moment Jesus is riding into Jerusalem from the east on a donkey, followed by a procession of peasants, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, is riding at the head of an imperial procession from the west. All are coming because of the approaching Passover festival. The Romans came in case there was trouble. Because the Passover celebrates the Jewish people’s liberation from Egypt, it is an occasion when those who crave liberation from Rome might get stirred up.

Last year we talked about this clash – the one between Pax Romana, the oppressive peace of the Roman Empire, and Shalom, the peaceful reign of God embodied in Jesus. But Rome is not the only authority that perceives a threat from Jesus on this Palm Sunday, and perhaps not even the most important one for us to consider. The religious authorities also consider Jesus a threat. This is not news; the scribes and Pharisees have been criticizing and questioning Jesus throughout his ministry. But today the conflict becomes crystal clear. You may have noticed that we did not read the Passion this morning, as is typical on Palm Sunday. Instead, we read the story of what we call Jesus’ cleansing of the temple. Jesus comes to the very seat of religious power and makes a scene.

The temple was believed to be God’s dwelling place on earth, and it was no doubt bustling with activity as Passover approached and pilgrims from around the country came to offer sacrifices. The temple was not a building, but a complex. The holy of holies was reserved for the priests. The inner courtyards were reserved for Jews – one for men, one for women. Outside the walls was the Court of the Gentiles. That outer court is where all the commerce happened. And that is where Jesus acted. He drove out all the people who were selling and buying, he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. Essentially, Jesus shut down temple operations. Why?

He called it a “den of robbers.” We think we know what that means. That stuff shouldn’t be bought and sold in God’s house. But Marcus Borg and Dom Crossan point out in their book *The Last Week* that “money changers and animal sellers were perfectly legitimate and absolutely

necessary for the temple's normal functioning. Money changers were needed so Jewish pilgrims could pay the temple tax in the only approved coinage. Buying animals and birds on site was the only way pilgrims could be sure the creatures were ritually adequate for sacrifice." It is not that the money changers are charging outrageous sums, or that the animals are wildly overpriced. That is not Jesus' chief complaint. Borg and Crossan explain, "A den is a hideaway, a safe house, a refuge. It is not where robbers rob, but where they flee for safety having done their robbing elsewhere."

The temple is a den of robbers because it is a refuge for those who insist on "right" worship *inside* the temple but do not work for God's justice *outside* the temple. The temple authorities add to the people's burdens rather than relieving them. They are actively participating in the domination system of the Roman empire, a system that works *against* the inbreaking reign of God, a future they as leaders of God's people should be working *for*.

The high priest and temple authorities were client-rulers of Israel, the middlemen between the Roman governor and the people. As such, they were loyal to Rome. Their primary roles were to make sure that the annual tribute to Rome was paid and to maintain domestic peace and order. The temple authorities saw Jesus and the crowds who followed him as a threat to peace and order. To be fair, they were in a tough spot. In their minds, they were saving the people from a worse situation. If they were no longer trusted to rule for Rome, who might Rome install in their place, and what would happen to the temple?

So on one side of town we have Jesus and his followers, those who seek liberation from oppression, those who love God and are less and less tethered to the institutional authorities who claim to speak for God. On the other side of town we have the Roman Empire marching into town to put on a show of force. And in the middle we have the temple authorities.

In the midst of the conflicts playing out between these forces, all I can hear this week is the children crying out in the temple. "Hosanna to the Son of David!" Save us, Jesus! Save us. The children are not jockeying for position or power. They are hurting and powerless and they know Jesus listens to their cries. "Let the children come to me," he said, "for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them."

God is on their side. Jesus is on their side.

The temple authorities want Jesus to shush the children. They wish he would stop putting ideas in people's heads about how it doesn't have to be this way – about how God's reign turns the powers of this world upside down. They know that going up against Rome is dangerous, and they're pretty comfortable so they'd rather not jeopardize their position. They're trying to ride this line of being loyal to Rome and faithful to God, and Jesus says no. You have to choose. You may say you love God, but all the pretty worship in the world isn't worth anything when the lives of God's children are at stake.

We know which side the temple authorities choose. Comfort, status quo, alliance with Rome.

What about us? Because make no mistake, we are asked to choose. Every generation of faithful people is faced with a similar choice. Our churches are pretty comfortable places. Are we shushing the children, the poor, the marginalized who are crying out for help? Or are we crying out with them? Are we joining with Jesus to bring the good news of God's reign – in concrete action – to all people?

Sitting here on Sunday isn't enough to change the world. Letting what we experience here on Sunday transform us into instruments of God's love the other 6 days of the week is what will change the world. It is not easy. It may be dangerous. Jesus is with us.

Amen.