

Joyful Resistance
Palm Sunday
Catonsville Presbyterian Church
Rev. Roy W. Howard

I've gathered some historical context for our celebration of Palm Sunday. Much of it you may already know. I still find it helpful. You may find the context helpful, too, as together we discern God's way in the world. And I know from your pastor that you have been deeply concerned with Russia's war against Ukraine. I believe you will see the connections.

At the time of Jesus, Jerusalem was under the brutal occupation of Rome. Farmers, barely able to raise enough to feed their families, paid 25% of their harvest to Rome every two years and 10% of their harvest to the Temple every year. Enormous amounts of resources were taken from the people of Israel to benefit the Roman Empire.

Roman troops enforced the economy of extraction with force and punished anyone who dared to rebel against the Roman authority. For example, the Romans crucified 2,000 people and left the bodies to rot outside the Galilean city of Sepphoris after a brief rebellion. The Israelites were particularly hard for the Romans to pacify. Central to the identity of Jewish people was (and is) the story of the Exodus where God delivered the people from a brutal empire ruled by Pharaoh. By the time of Jesus, people were increasingly expecting liberation from the Roman Empire just as they had been liberated from Egypt. The annual Passover celebration (the story of Exodus retold) often turned into a time of social unrest and calls for liberation, especially in Jerusalem.

Over time, the Romans perfected the art of putting on intimidating triumphal processions. The formula was carefully planned. First, the new ruler of a vanquished city would march in on horseback accompanied by his troops, wagons loaded with treasure and prisoners in chains. Crowds, who were often forced from their houses and herded to the street by Roman soldiers in order to give the impression of popular support for the regime, would welcome the parade. The new ruler and his entourage would proceed to the local temple to offer a cultic sacrifice to whatever gods were honored there, and to the Roman gods "who had made the conquest possible."

Again, by the time of Jesus violent riots were such a regular feature of the season of Passover each year that the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate had begun to make it a practice every spring around Passover to leave his headquarters in Caesarea fifty miles away to the west and travel those fifty miles across the countryside and process through the streets of Jerusalem to his palace there. (cf. Ron Lucky ELCA pastor)

Now we might begin to understand why the poet John Leax once said Palm Sunday "seems the strangest holiday of the year, a **celebration of misunderstanding.**" It begins with the festival atmosphere of children waving their palms and leading the rest of us in singing glad hosannas to

our Lord, reenacting the joyful crowd of disciples who lined the dusty road as Jesus entered Jerusalem.

It's a makeshift parade - the kind children conjure up on a bright spring day, playing in the backyard, lining up after each other, wearing funny hats, blowing kazoos and appointing one of their own a king. What would this crazy parade be without a donkey to carry the triumphant king? A donkey? Seriously? Yes, a donkey shall carry this king. (At least that is what Matthew says, echoing the prophecy of Zechariah.) Then who will find a donkey at this late hour? Good question! Why you will, faithful disciples, ever ready to serve! You will find the donkey that will carry our king.

So, playing the fool, off you go looking for a donkey to haul into this parade, simply because Jesus said so. That's all you need to say to the owner whose jaw drops when you start to steal his donkey off the street in broad daylight. Negotiating a donkey so The MESSIAH can ride in glory? Oy vey! This is what it's come to?

Okay; yes, it's true Luke and Mark refer to a colt along with the donkey; still it's not exactly a stallion fit for the Empire's version of King.

You might think it's a joke, only it isn't. But actually it is a joke in the way that only God can tell a joke in the mystery of the world's redemption. Some scholars think the two disciples sent out to find the colt were James and John, *which is hilarious* because only a few days earlier they were asking Jesus to put them in the best seats in house, on the left and right hand when he comes in glory. Now it comes to this: finding a suitable animal for his triumphal entry!

Another **misunderstanding** has to do with the entry itself. What kind of triumph is this? Some are excited enough to take the cloaks off their backs and cover the road. Sorta like a red carpet. But there is something weird; maybe even foolish. Where are the public leaders – both religious and political? Maybe they are trying to corral the unpredictable crowds on the outskirts of town who are inclined to gather around this humble prophet.

And I imagine those merciful eyes of Jesus as he slowly approaches the city. Is that a sad smile or a determined grimace? What is he is thinking as he listens to the crowds sing his praise and welcoming his entourage of exuberant disciples. For his part, Jesus is weeping over the city. *Weeping that we do not know the things that make for peace.* Does anyone have a clue who he is and what he intends to do now that he has entered the city of power and might? They welcome him as one who blesses them. The joy they have in Jesus can be described as *joyful resistance*. It's an alternative to the power they (and we) know so well.

Unlike the powerful of the empire, the disciples are beginning to understand that Jesus' kingdom – the kingdom of God – is not about blessing things as they are presently arranged, but changing them until the present arrangement reflects the world God intends. Everything is at risk when Jesus begins his entry into Jerusalem. Political arrangements are at risk, the ones that ensure the

poor will remain so forever, that dissidents will be silenced, and brute force will be deployed when necessary to maintain political order.

The parade is a declaration. It's an act of resistance. It's a proclamation of an entirely different kingdom with a different Ruler of our lives. And so we rejoice gladly, waving our palms. Perhaps those early disciples had a glimpse of what was happening even if they didn't fully grasp what was coming, any more than we do.

Let us who sing gladly today not forget the reason why.

We are pressured to make accommodations to an order that declares war on the innocents, crucifies prophets and fears the stranger, puts cruelty over compassion, status over service and abandons love as mere poetry. Yet, God's arrangement is much wiser than our own.

Jesus comes riding into our lives promising to arrange things differently than this world's arrangement.

To those who receive Christ, our life is at risk. Change – beautiful change - is possible. We know what happens: *God's folly turns rejection, crucifixion, into an occasion for the healing of creation, the salvation of the world. We call this Easter.* When you receive Jesus triumphal entry into your own life, a new journey of healing and service and mercy begins. This is what our Christian faith calls salvation.

So today, we wave our palms, engaging in joyful resistance to the murderous powers of this world. *In Jesus' cross is our healing; in his resurrection is our hope.*

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.