Palm Sunday (Year A)

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*Matthew 21:14-17*

*The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’, they became angry and said to him, ‘Do you hear what these are saying?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Yes; have you never read,  
“Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies  
   you have prepared praise for yourself”?’   
He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.*

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On Thursday when I sat down at Green Joe’s on Battleground to write this sermon, I chatted briefly on the phone with Emmy Biaggi. She is one of several educators in our congregation and I felt it important to check in with her before interpreting today’s scripture in light of this week’s violence at a church school in Nashville. We shared with one another our fear, our anger, and our disbelief that such occurrences have been so commonplace. We expressed frustration at the default posture of demurring to “mental health” as the cause of such tragedies instead of tackling meaningful, comprehensive gun safety reform. Both she, as a teacher, and I, as a parent, agreed that we sometimes have to just “not think about it too much” in order to not give into despair. But additionally, we grieved the desensitization that has been the inevitable result of the frequency of such atrocities. And desensitized people become apathetic people and such is not a faithful Christian response to the brokenness of the world. A heart desensitized is a heart incapable of compassion or empathy.

My hope is that a faithful interpretation of today’s scripture would combat the desensitizing we all are tempted to give in to. My hope is that this story, this redeeming Word, this radically *non-violent* Word, would break our hearts open in ways that allow God’s peace to flow out from us and into our neighborhoods.

Jesus’ procession, I trust, is a familiar one to many of you. So I’d like to focus on another procession that happened simultaneously in Jerusalem that day. It was the beginning of Passover, that yearly celebration when the occupied Jewish people remembered the story of their liberation from the grip of Pharaoh’s violence. For obvious reasons, the Romans did not appreciate their subjects remembering a story of being liberated from an oppressive political regime. Therefore, Jerusalem during the week of Passover was a very tense place to be. It wasn’t uncommon for the Romans to double their military presence in the city, lest the Jews get any ideas of rebellion. It was for this reason that another procession happened on the opposite side of the city from Jesus’ procession.

Pontius Pilate, decked out in his shiniest armor and with his battle sword strapped to his side, rode in on a four-horse chariot. Behind him were legions of soldiers, likewise dressed in their battle-gear. The army would march through Jerusalem, reminding the Jewish occupants of the futility of resistance. It was a ritualistic glorification of violence. And it would have been a familiar ritual for the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Every time the Romans conquered another people, they would circulate an “euangelion” - literally, “good news” - compelling everyone to take to the streets to celebrate the “good news” of Rome’s latest military conquest. This “good news” of the empire would glorify the violence that kept the people in their subservient state.

We know far too much about the glorification of violence in this country. We, too, have familiar rituals whenever violence happens. And these rituals have been second nature. The pattern continues, the news cycle moves on, and we wait for the next seemingly inevitable mass shooting. And, again, we elect politicians on both sides of the aisle that fail to protect us because of their competing interests with various lobbies and interest groups.

I’ll re-emphasize something I’ve said before and I’ll say again: it’s not my job to tell you how to vote. To me, this is not a partisan issue; it’s a humanitarian crisis. It’s not a partisan issue; it’s a *Gospel* issue. We must ask ourselves how we can circulate a different kind of euangelion than the one Rome would circulate after it’s latest bloodbath. Instead, we need a euangelion, a good news, of a different kind. And Jesus gives us that different kind of good news.

I want to lift up before us a part of the text that is often overlooked because I believe it speaks to the pain and fear we all feel as a result of yet another mass shooting that has taken the lives of children. After Jesus presents his non-violent alternative to Pilate’s armor-plated, sword-swinging procession, he goes to the temple, flips some tables, drives out the money changers, and makes whole people with blindness and other disabilities. And then there’s a very curios part of the text that follows that is haunting me as we process the violence of last week.

But before we explore that line it’s important to note a translation issue. Palm Sunday is famous for us singing Hosanna as did the people in today’s story. We wave palm branches, and sing Hosanna, we pray Hosanna, and we preach our Hosannas. It is often assumed that that word is some sort of acclamation of praise or adoration. It isn’t. Hosanna literally means “save us.” And now we return our attention to verse 15 of today’s story.

“…the children [cried] out in the temple, ‘Save us, Son of David.’”

**Today’s passage has children literally crying out to be saved.**

Less than a year ago, 19 children at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas cried out “Hosanna, save us!”

Ten years ago, 20 children between the ages of six and seven years old at Sandy Hook Elementary School cried out “Hosanna, save us!”

16 years ago, 32 students at Virginia Tech University cried out “Hosanna, save us!”

5 years ago, 17 students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida cried out “Hosanna, save us!” After that atrocity, millions of students around the country took to the streets, doing their own Palm Sunday processions, yelling to the politicians, “Hosanna, save us!”

The dozens of children that attend our preschool, including my two daughters, and their parents, including the one that stands before you this day, cry out “Hosanna, save us!” “Hosanna, save them!”

Do we hear their cries? Are they heard in the halls of our government? Are they heard in the ballot box? Are they heard in our congregations? Are they heeded? Are they valued?

The children in today’s scripture cry out to Jesus to save them. And the religious leaders, frustrated by all this distress, ask Jesus if he hears the children. And his response is simple. “Yes,” Jesus says, “I hear them. **Jesus hears the cries of the children. He hears *their* hosanna. And, so too, must we.**

Each week of this Lenten season, we’ve been guided by a different question. And today’s question is, “Where are you headed?” And today, the question might be revised as such: “Which procession are we headed to?” Are we headed to the procession where violence is glorified? The procession where we stand in awe of the might of our weapons and their power to dominate, divide, and destruct.

Or do we head to a different procession? A procession of a Messiah who hears our hosannas and provides a non-violent alternative in a culture of violence-worship. A procession of a man who has no sword by his side but is instead armed with the Word of God that tells us that the time is coming when weapons of war will be dismembered and transformed into gardening tools (Isaiah 2). A procession of a man who wears no tactical gear, but a simple linen tunic. A procession of a man who will himself die at the hands of violence and lift up his own hosanna on the cross in a few short days. A procession of a man who resurrection assures us that that violence will never, *never,* have the final word. A procession that promises peace everlasting and an end to senseless violence. A procession that promises that the cries of our children *will* be heard.

That, my neighbors, is where Christ is headed. Where are *you* headed?

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s children crying out “save us” say: Amen.