

“Love Is the Way”  
 (taken from Bp. M. Curry’s book title)  
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 New Song Episcopal Church  
 Palm Sunday – Year B  
 March 28, 2021

Liturgy of Palms: Mark 11:1-11;  
 Psalm, 118:1-2, 19-29  
 Liturgy of Passion: Isaiah 50: 4-9a  
 Psalm 31:9-16  
 Philippians 2:5-11  
 Mark 15:1-39

Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosannah in the highest!  
 As a child of the 60’s, I love that the Church has a holy day that arose from street theater! I’m of course talking about Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem we celebrate on Palm Sunday. Most of us grew up thinking this grand parade was entirely a spontaneous outpouring of support for Jesus, and certainly that’s part of what happened.

But there are two things that indicate it was also carefully choreographed theater. Every year at Passover, the Roman governor of Judea – in this case Pilate – left the comfort of his country estate to go to Jerusalem as thousands of religious pilgrims converged there. Jewish nationalists had more than once riled up the crowds gathered to commemorate Israel’s liberation from a foreign empire. So, to show the might of the Roman empire, Pilate would have paraded triumphantly into the city riding on a war horse, accompanied by chariots and soldiers. Palm branches would have been laid down before Pilate, too, as a sign of honor, or at least of intimidation.

Then, on the other side of the city, Jesus came riding in on the foal of a donkey. A pretty good parody of the power of empire, I think.

And, as always, Jesus was intentional about showing how his actions flowed from his Jewish heritage. 500 years earlier, the prophet Zechariah had given hope to the Israelites exiled in Babylon by proclaiming (9:9-10):

Your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he,  
 humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.  
 I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem;  
 and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations.

So, for any with eyes to see, Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem was a parable in action. On the one hand, it was a critique of political and military might. And on the other, it was a solemn enactment of God’s desire -- and unstoppable power – to bring peace to this world by wielding only love.

The paradoxical power of divine love and even godly meekness to overcome human oppression and violence was central to Jesus’ purpose, then and now. But Jesus’ was not naïve. He knew what he was walking into. He knew that human crowds are fickle and volatile. He could see the shifting of loyalties, the betrayal, suffering and death, that were to be his lot.

He knew his walk into Jerusalem was the beginning of the end. Not only for his earthly life, but also for the Jewish people as they understood themselves, and even for the human race as we had known ourselves to that point in history.

As the son of God, Jesus was able to comprehend human culture from beyond its confines. He could see our universal reliance on competition and violence, on domination and oppression that lies at the root of human culture, for the sad lie that it is. He also understood

God's on-going project of un-doing the primordial misstep made by our earliest ancestors. And he was doing his part to move it along. Let me explain what I mean.

Our original, serpentine misperception back there in the Garden -- that even God was competing with us -- was not due to a moral flaw. It was simply a -- somewhat -- workable evolutionary option that allowed our species to survive. You might even call it an "accident" of evolution, necessary but not inevitable.

We humans emerged from our proto-human relatives primarily due to our growing brains and increased ability to imitate. Imitation is how primates learn everything -- from how to walk to how to think to how to love. This imitation is most often completely unconscious.

Brain scientists now know our mirror neurons even unconsciously imitate gestures of desire made by others. Unfortunately, these mirror neurons work so well they lead us to instinctively covet what we perceive others want. And since many objects of desire are finite, we end up competing and fighting over them. Whenever my grandson looks with interest at something, let alone reaches for it, his little sister makes a beeline for it. And she's just a baby!

Unlike other animals, humans' mimetic nature is so developed that our imitation of violence itself proved to be so contagious it threatened to wipe us all out. But again, pretty much by accident, we discovered that sometimes violence actually stilled further violence, at least for a time. This happened when an accusatory gesture was imitated until a community in turmoil could come together enough to discharge all their violence on a marginalized person or group.

We attributed this awe-inspiring violence that brought sudden peace to the gods. Over the eons we ritualized this in the form of blood sacrifice, first of humans, then animals. Eventually, we gave authority over our violence to kings, and then the state. From Cain's murder of his brother onward, human culture has been saturated by violence. The functioning of the world we know today is still utterly dependent on state sanctioned violence and oppression of all kinds. And still, we're pummeled by unsanctioned, random violence. Most ominously, our destruction of the earth itself looms before us.

Yet, God knows this was the best we could do those long eons ago, and has wept with us throughout the ages. Thankfully, our way is not God's way. God is Love, which is always and everywhere non-violent. So God sent Jesus to us, after a long line of Hebrew prophets, to lovingly challenge our violent misunderstanding of God, and so of ourselves.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem with total faith in the one true God; a faith stirred by the imagination of the ages. He trusted that God could and would use all the destruction and death the world could muster for the transformation of humankind and the redemption of all creation.

On Palm Sunday, at the threshold of our holiest week, Jesus invites us to follow him into the broken heart of our world, where he freely chose to take on human violence by way of the Cross. We're invited to give ourselves over not only to faith IN Christ but to the faith OF Christ. We're asked to imitate Jesus' trust that God's love is more powerful even than death.

Actually, as the Creator and Giver of Life, God's power to overcome death was really the easier part, demonstrated, as it was, in just three days. This was nowhere near the miracle as is the oh-so-slow, evolutionary undoing of our illusions about what makes God's world go round. The veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom at Jesus' death to reveal the lie of divine violence. But we still, for the most part, are blind to what lies beyond that falsehood.

Jesus chose to suffer the violence of the world, not because an angry God demanded his death to ransom us from our sin, but to show us that God is not involved in violence at all. Jesus endured our scapegoating brutality to show us that God's merciful, forgiving love is the only thing that can break the bonds of violence that enslave us.

Jesus shows us the way out of what is destroying our world, if we will just trust in God's loving, peaceable power that is far greater than violence and death. If we will entrust ourselves to God's humble power, then non-violence and self-sacrifice for the sake even of our enemies will become our way of life. Just as it was for Jesus.

Paul's letter to the Philippians urges us to put on the mind of Christ. In the couple of verses before those we read to today, Paul tells us what that looks like in clear, practical terms. He says (2:3,4): Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

My hope for all of us is that we will do our best to follow Jesus in living this way during this Holy Week. To the extent we do this, we will actively participate with Jesus in God's evolutionary Easter re-boot, so that Humanity 2.0 can rise with Christ.

For truly, love is the way! Hosannah in the highest!