

“Give Me Jesus”

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Mark 11:1-10; Mark 15:6-15

Sunday, March 28, 2010

I just need to start by saying that I'm so glad I belong to a congregation that has a prom. I think it's safe to say that not many do. I also need to say—particularly for the sake of those who were not at “The Beach Ball” last night—that I refused an offer that Marvin Schrock made. He was willing to donate a hundred dollars to our Cuba partnership if I showed up tonight to preach in my Grand Prize-winning mermaid outfit. That seemed a little inappropriate to me.

And in fact I spent quite a bit of time late last night trying to scrub off my fingernails all the sparkly-glittery blue nail polish that Leigh Siler had so graciously helped me put there for the prom. I figured the toenails could wait. What I didn't know about was the footwashing at the prison this morning during the service of baptism that Mark officiated. Let's just say that it was interesting.

Friends, we are walking into one emotional roller coaster of a week. The common lectionary gives preachers the option to consider this Palm Sunday—or Passion Sunday. A celebration of a triumphal entry—or a lamentation of a crucifixion. Of the more than eighty verses listed as potential texts for today, I chose two passages that I believe frame for us the message of this stunning week.

We start with a crowd. Shouts of “Hosanna!” “Hallelujah!” “Blessed is the One who is here among us, this One for whom we have waited and longed, this Son of God!” People waved palm branches, and spread their cloaks—and the shouts of adoration reached the sky. Luke's version of this event has it that not just the humans but all of creation joined in the acclamation: Jesus told the naysayers that, even if the people were silenced, the stones would pick up the chorus and hum the praise.

But there's something slightly off about this parade. One would have expected that a person of such repute and popularity as the object of the crowd's adoration would have made his grand entrance on a fine steed, a spirited, high-stepping horse. But here came Jesus sitting on a donkey.

The gospel writers make a point of sharing the small detail that this was a colt, a young donkey “who had never been ridden.” So you have to imagine the comedy of the situation. In equestrian language, this donkey was “unbroken.” It probably slid away from Jesus a few times before he got situated on its back, and may well have done its best to buck him off. Luke says the disciples had to set Jesus on it.

Jesus would have been hard pressed to pick a more humble and absurd posture than entering Jerusalem riding on a donkey. The donkey symbolized his intention of peace. A horse would have sent a very different message.

Fast-forward five days. Another crowd—but many of the same players. Adoration has turned to scorn, praise has been displaced by fear. How quickly the adulations of Palm Sunday turned into the agonies of Holy Week.

A great deal has happened in five days. An anonymous woman has anointed Jesus, the Passover meal has been shared with his disciples, Peter has denied and Judas has betrayed. Jesus was arrested in the garden under cover of night and is now standing before Governor Pilate in the harsh glare of day.

It is the custom at Passover to release a prisoner. Pilate also has in custody a man named Barabbas, a renowned offender who has been convicted of murder and insurrection. The governor, knowing what's what, believes that Jesus' only crime is that he has aroused the jealousy of the religious authorities.

“Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” he asks, revealing his bias and acknowledging Jesus with a title of honor. I think the next sentence is one of the most important in the story: “But the chief priests *stirred up the crowd* to have him release Barabbas for them instead.”

What we have here is a mob scene. The religious leaders worked the crowd, letting their wish be known, telling one person and then another. It spread through that multitude like a disease. In fact, I have a colleague in ministry in Atlanta who has a name for this disease. He calls it “Barabbasitis.” It means joining in the clamor, going along with the crowd. It's an old and enduring malady.

So let's say there's this itinerant preacher and teacher in first-century Palestine. He preaches salvation, and compassion, and justice. And he notices that a lot of the people coming to see him in the throngs that crowd around him are sick. Only the rich people could afford doctors in those days, and most of the Jews in occupied Palestine were far from rich.

So the teacher begins to miraculously heal them—all those individuals stricken by leprosy and paralysis and lack of sight, who can't afford decent medical care. This gets the authorities all riled up. They imagine their control eroding and their profits evaporating. So they go around sowing dissension and spreading lies.

"It's Armageddon," declares a Pharisee, a keeper of the law from southern Palestine.

It's "corrupt" and "scary," "undemocratic" and "un-Palestinian," say the talking heads on Herod the Fox's News program.

"Don't retreat, instead reload," says a governor from the North to Pilate at the National Governor's Convention, claiming she saw Jesus consorting with the Russians from her front porch. It's "liberalism." It's "socialism." "It'll ruin us all."

Send a few death threats, throw a few bricks through office windows, slash some gas lines—all in the name of protecting Palestine. Spread a few lies, create a little panic, and even the people with the most to gain from Jesus' universal healthcare plan will turn against it. Crowds can be easily stirred up.

As Jesus stood before Pilate awaiting his fate, there was only one dissenting voice that we know of. It was the voice of a woman, the wife of Pilate. Like many women, she remains nameless in scripture; but tradition says that her name was Claudia. Claudia had a disturbing dream the night before, which made it clear to her that Jesus was innocent. She trusted her intuition and sent a message to her husband.

It was a brave act. Pilate was already sitting on the judgment throne when his wife tried to change the course of history. And Pilate knew that she was right—he gave the crowd several chances to change their collective mind. But the machinery of death had already been set in motion, grinding toward its inevitable end. The people had chosen who would be set free and saved from death. "Give us Barabbas," they shouted. "Give us Barabbas!"

It's easy to get the sense that this throng all shouted as one. But I doubt that a mob ever speaks with a united voice. I have to believe that there were a few people standing among the others, who harbored a vague uneasiness that what was going on was wrong. And I have to believe there were some who were sure without a doubt that a great travesty was taking place.

I wonder who was in the crowd that day.

Might there have been a little girl in that multitude, the daughter of a synagogue leader, who had died and been brought back to life? When she blinked herself awake, the first face she saw was Jesus's, full of tenderness and compassion. Might she have stood in that crowd, in the midst of the noisy clamor, whispering, "Give me Jesus"?

Was there a man who had been born without sight, who had spent his days begging at the gate of the city—until the teacher came and touched his eyes and gave him vision? The first face he, too, saw, was Jesus's. Might he have been in the crowd that day shouting, "Give me Jesus!"

What about the bent-over woman, who had spent eighteen years seeing nothing but the ground and her shame? When she was healed, she saw for the first time eye to eye. And the eyes into which she gazed were those same gentle eyes of Jesus.

Was the man who had been commanded "Take up your bed and walk" there? How about the leper who was healed? What about the woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage and shameful isolation for twelve long years, until Jesus used her faith to restore her to wholeness? Were they there that day, the healed and the whole and the hope-filled, mustering enough courage to go against the crowd and shout, "Give me Jesus"?

They may not have been heard over the clamor of the throng that day, but I believe Jesus heard them.

This morning I witnessed a most extraordinary thing as six inmates at Marion Correctional Institute proclaimed, "Give me Jesus." The story is Mark Siler's to tell, and I hope that he will someday share it from this pulpit. But all of us there felt the power of that proclamation, and the tears that it brought.

Against all odds, six men were baptized by immersion. And in that place where dignity is constantly attacked, and spirits are regularly broken, and racial tension fills all the spaces—a visiting room was turned into a chapel; and dignity was uplifted; and the Holy Spirit showed up; and African-American, Native American, Latino, Asian-American, and Euro-American men stood by one another as sponsors and washed one another's feet as brothers. I have never seen anything quite like it. As I sat in a plastic chair, with my sparkly-glittery blue toenails in a basin of warm water, and a newly baptized Christian with a full-forearm tattoo that can only be described as pornographic gently washed my feet and proclaimed "God bless you," all I could do was receive the gift and ponder the ironies and mysteries of God's grace. "Give me Jesus any day."

It's never easy to go against the crowd; but the good news is that there's always someone watching, someone taking note, some life being transformed.

It's never easy to go against the crowd. We were reminded this past week about the cost that can come. Wednesday was the thirtieth anniversary of the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. In the midst of overwhelming military terror in his country, Romero publicly beseeched the soldiers from his pulpit, "Stop the repression!"

The next day, while he was raising the chalice at a Mass for indigent patients in a cancer hospital, he was gunned down, his blood spilling over the altar. Going against the crowd can get you shot. Or crucified.

But the good news is that there's always someone in the crowd watching, someone taking note, some life being transformed. The death of Archbishop Romero became a turning point in the struggle for justice in Central America, and for many of us the entry point into years of solidarity work with its suffering people.

"El Salvador" means "The Savior." It was a land crucified. It is a land being resurrected.

My dear friend Yvonne Dilling, who worked for more than a decade with Salvadoran refugees, tells of a particularly difficult time, when a whole village was fleeing across the Lempa River, being strafed by bullets from U.S. helicopters. Yvonne carried screaming children on her back across the river to safety in a camp in Honduras. She became quite overcome with grief and discouragement about the constant suffering she was witnessing.

A Salvadoran woman gently confronted her. She reminded Yvonne that every time the refugees were displaced and had to build a new camp, they immediately formed three committees: a construction committee, an education committee, and the *comité de alegría*—"the committee of joy." Celebration was as basic to the life of the refugees as digging latrines and teaching their children to read.

This is indeed a roller coaster of a week. But we know the ending of the story. Threads of joy are woven through its darkest hours. Resurrection follows crucifixion.

I invite us to keep that in our sights as we walk through these difficult days. There will be clamor all around us. Through it all, may those of us who have been welcomed, and touched, and healed, and forgiven by a Risen Savior find the strength to whisper—and maybe even the courage to shout—"Give me Jesus!"

Amen.