

## **“Examining the Part of the Story We Try To Avoid”**

**Luke 19:28–40**

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For those who love a world with neatly separated categories, like divided plates that separate food so that it doesn't touch — Dana likes those since she eats one thing at a time — but for those who love such a world, this is not going to be an easy week. We might think that Holy Week of all weeks in the year will be free of all things other than the spiritual, and thus this deeply sacred time will not even entertain the notion of anything political. We could all use a “politics-free” week right now! But we can only think this if we haven't read the story.

Jesus does not seek political power, and faith in him transcends all loyalties, including political loyalties, but he is not bashful about confronting those in power, religious or political, calling them out on occasion, like when he calls Herod a fox (Luke 13:32), and this week he walks right into the den of power. It is not surprising that this does not end well, especially since he doesn't bring an army, but as we know, he has his reasons, his purposes, his mission.

It begins with today's events, Palm Sunday, the day Jesus enters Jerusalem to a hero's welcome. To underscore the political character of what happens, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan paint a picture of two processions which take place (*The Last Week*, pp. 1-5). From the West comes Pilate draped in all the gaudy trappings of political power — horses, chariots, and gleaming armor. He enters with the Roman army during Passover to make sure nothing gets out of control. After all, the possibility of insurrection is in the air whenever the Hebrew people remember God's deliverance of them from slavery in Egypt.

From the East comes Jesus wearing an ordinary robe and riding on a young donkey and a borrowed one at that — no horses, no chariots, no armor, no army. It feels a bit like the rag-tag group of Scots with their limited weaponry led by the Bonnie (and Daft) Prince Charlie at Culloden on April

16, 1746, going against the massive British army with all its weaponry. This isn't going to be much of a fight. But, of course, Jesus isn't looking for a military fight. This is a highly ritualized prophetic act that fulfills the vision found in Zechariah 9:9f of a new kind of king, a king of peace who dismantles the weaponry of war.

The contrast could not be clearer. These are two very different processions led by two very different figures. We might assume one is purely political while the other is purely spiritual, but how do Jesus followers greet him? "Blessed is the *king* who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" It is a quote of Psalm 118:26 except the Psalm says, "Blessed is the *one* who comes in the name of the Lord!" The word "king" is substituted here, indicating a political interest on the part of the crowd, even if Jesus does his best to discourage this interest. It is this political interest that leads to his death.

There are some religious leaders whom Jesus threatens as much as the Romans, but this is not what gets him killed. We need to remember this and stop participating in the anti-Semitic interpretations of the passion narrative that blame Jewish people for this Jewish man's death. Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine told a number of us at a conference several weeks ago at Wake Forest University Divinity School that Jewish children are still told by Christian children that they killed Jesus. There is even a game for children and youth called *Pharisee, The Party Game* in which participants must find all the Pharisees and get them before they get you! Sadly, I am not making this up.

It is the Romans, not the Jews, who are in charge, and they don't tolerate any hint of rebellion. Crucifixion is one of the most brutal ways they do away with any rebellious wannabes and make an example of them. We need only consider the sign they place over Jesus as he dies — Jesus of Nazareth — The King of the Jews.

Given the typical Roman response to rebellion, one biblical scholar in another church I served argued that what we remember today could never even have happened. The Romans would have stopped Jesus and his followers at the city gates, Bea argues. There is no extracanonical evidence to support the passion narrative as we have it. Jesus and the disciples would have been killed before they could enter Jerusalem.

To be clear, I am not embracing this theory. There is no extracanonical evidence for it either! But the historical insight behind it is valid. The Romans don't play around with power. We might as well try to become a national leader in Russia right now. We know where that got Alexei Navalny... Call yourself a king or allow others to do so, and you won't last long. There is only one king, Caesar, and he doesn't share power.

The thing is Jesus is interested in power, just a different kind — one shaped by compassion and suffering love, not force and coercion; one focused on redemption and reconciliation, not domination; one rooted in the heart yet encompassing all of life, as opposed to being heartless for self-aggrandizement. So, with this view of power in mind, Jesus comes into town and lays down the gantlet, he lets the chips fall where they may, and they do, tragically, it seems, he dies a brutal death at the hands of the Empire; only we know better, this is not the end.

We might think of the scene in “Star Wars: A New Hope” wherein Darth Vader is about to kill Obi-Wan Kenobi. It is distressing to Luke Skywalker at the time, but Obi-Wan tells Vader he cannot win; if he strikes him down, he will become more powerful than Vader can possibly imagine. Or if we don't care for Star Wars, we might think of Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, C.S. Lewis' Christ-figure who overcomes the powers of evil and death with self-sacrifice. There are many ways the same principle has been illustrated, but the principle is the same throughout — the powers of evil are overcome but with a very different kind of power. Jesus conquers through a cross.

So, what is the message for us? It is partly a message about the identity of Jesus, who he is and how he goes about his mission. He is not enticed by the world's power, we know this much from how he responds to the temptations in the wilderness, but nor is he oblivious to or dismissive of this power. He knows how much the systems and structures of this world affect the lives of God's children he has come to save. The ancient prophets rail against unjust national practices which exploit the poor and vulnerable to benefit the rich and powerful. So does Jesus in parable after parable and interaction after interaction.

Jesus certainly addresses spiritual concerns. His life, death, and resurrection seek healing from human brokenness and sin. But this

brokenness and sin are manifested not just in individual thoughts and actions but in the working of systems and structures, in the actions of leaders and nations. Furthermore, in the Jesus story, we cannot neatly separate the spiritual from the earthly. The message of incarnation is that in Christ God takes on human form, thus identifying with every aspect of who we are and seeking the redemption of the whole world. For God so loved *the world*, says John 3:16, and every part of it.

Baptist Joint Committee Director James Dunn put it something like this in public policy courses at Wake Forest University. “God is Lord of the entire universe, not just your personal universe.” James was a dear friend, but he could be feisty, yet it seems indisputable. Is there any part of life that is off-limits to God? Not all things are yet subject to God’s reign, but God does seek the transformation of the world, which means we cannot simply draw a big circle around anything and everything in the public realm and say, “This is off-limits for the church.”

The narrative of this week, beginning with Palm Sunday, tells us who Jesus is and how he goes about his work, one who redeems the whole world by giving himself to it in love, even seeking to transform political realities, though in unconventional ways. And if this is who Jesus is, there are implications for who we are as his followers. Like him, we should not be enticed by political power. James Dunn often said that whenever the church gets into bed with the state, the church gets used. Like I said, he was feisty! But nor should we be oblivious to or dismissive of political power.

Political power is killing Ukrainians, Israelis, and Palestinians we care about right now. Political power is oppressing Christians in places like Pakistan and Afghanistan right now but also people of other faiths in other contexts. Political power is oppressing immigrants and refugees we love and work with in this land right now. Political power is fueling the fires of hatred and fear in an effort to control and manipulate, telling lies about vulnerable people, thus violating the ninth commandment, and cutting off the support of compassionate work around the world that interfaces with the work of missionaries.

It may be tempting to hide away in a corner to keep ourselves unstained from the chaos, pray for the world but keep our hands clean, like Pilate... but Jesus sends his disciples into the world, telling them to be wise as serpents

and innocent as doves (Matthew 10:16). We are to be in but not of the world, he says in John 17:16, but there is no biblical justification for becoming We Bury Our Heads in the Sand Baptist Church at a time like this, only a calling to maintain our integrity as we seek to love the world with the God who was in Christ.

So, how do we do that? It begins with a willingness to get our hands dirty. Jesus does not say, “I can’t go to Jerusalem because someone might think it is too political.” He understands his calling, he knows what his mission is, and nothing will deter him from it, not criticism, not threats, not even death itself. When we understand our calling, we develop a similar sense of resolve.

We don’t stop working for affordable housing, advocating for the compassionate treatment of immigrants, or fighting racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism because someone thinks it’s too political. We keep opening the doors to the clothing ministry, letting the White Flag Shelter women in, sharing the food truck barbecue with the food insecure even though these ministries can be messy. We are willing to get our hands dirty, but as we do, we recall why we are doing so, to extend love and compassion, and how, by following the One who ends up on a cross.

Twentieth-century Quaker Thomas R. Kelly put it this way.

Paradoxically, this total instruction proceeds in two opposing directions at once. We are torn loose from earthly attachments and ambitions – *contemptus mundi*. And we are quickened to a divine but painful concern for the world – *amor mundi*. (God) plucks the world out of our hearts loosening the chains of attachment. And (God) hurls the world into our hearts, where we and God together carry it in infinitely tender love. (*A Testament of Devotion*, p. 47)

This is all we are called to do, love the world, but we are called to do so every way possible as we follow the Christ who is willing to ride into danger on a borrowed donkey if that’s what it takes to save the world.