Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017

ZUMBRO
LUTHERAN CHURCH

Jerusalem is the Place Where Kings and Prophets are Made
LUKE 19:29-44
Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

LUKE 19:29-44 **NRSV**

29When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount
of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, 30saying, "Go into the village ahead of you,
and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie
it and bring it here. 31If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this: 'The
Lord needs it.' " 32So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told
them. 33As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you
untying the colt?" 34They said, "The Lord needs it." 35Then they brought it to Jesus;
and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. 36As he rode along,
people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. 37As he was now approaching the
path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to
praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen,
38saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!" 39Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him,
"Teacher, order your disciples to stop." 40He answered, "I tell you, if these were
silent, the stones would shout out."

41As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, 42saying, "If you, even you, had
only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are
hidden from your eyes. 43Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies
will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side.
44They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they
will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize
the time of your visitation from God."

Everyone likes a good parade. There's the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade complete with giant balloons hovering over 5th Avenue, singing and dancing, and of course, Santa Claus. Then there's the local parades which draw big crowds and rally around the community we all share. My kids love the Rochesterfest parade. The high school bands play peppy and familiar

tunes, the crazy Shriner drivers in their mini-cars zip and weave their way down the parade route. And of course, the buckets of candy passed out along the route, which send kids into a frenzy to see who gets the most.

Parades have another history too. They have been used by those in power to peddle propaganda and wield intimidation over enemies and subjects alike. Think of the Cold War when the Soviets paraded huge nuclear weapons down the streets of Moscow while throngs of soldiers marched in formation before and behind weapons. These parades said to the whole world, “Don’t mess with us, or there will be consequences.”

On that first Palm Sunday, there were likely two contrasting parades rolling into Jerusalem. The parade with Jesus and his disciples we know about: it was kind of a grassroots parade that sprung up around Jesus. Nothing too fancy or coordinated. People plucked palm branches from nearby trees and waved them. Others laid their coats along the path to signify something outside the ordinary was happening. And people shouted chants of salvation and hope, as if this was their last best chance for what they most desired.

The other parade was likely more flashy, and grander in scale. The governor Pilate was on his way into Jerusalem to oversee the crowds gathering for Passover. If you remember, Passover is the celebration of God delivering his people from the hands of Pharaoh in Egypt. More to the point, Pilate was there to remind the people that though their God had delivered them out of the hands of Pharaoh, they were still firmly in the hand of Rome. So Pilate came roaring into town on a great stallion, with centurions riding on chariots, Roman flags waving, drums beating, and Roman soldiers marching in formation. It was a not so subtle reminder that the pilgrims could have their party, but the real power was somewhere else.

Pilate was right to come to Jerusalem. It was the place where kings and prophets were made. His parade signaled that the king of the region was definitely the Emperor. But protest and challenge were brewing in Jerusalem that day. That upstart parade of people across town was pledging allegiance to another kind of king. The one arriving in Jerusalem on the back of a donkey announced a kingdom of peace, and offered healing and hope.

They couldn't help it, their lives had been changed. The parade was filled with people who had been left behind or left out by others but now had a community who embraced them. There were people whose bodies had been healed, who found peace when they felt there was no peace. It all came from this rural rabbi named Jesus who proclaimed the kingdom of God. Jesus met them where they were when no one else would pay them any attention. He came into Jerusalem to establish his kingdom where others might join his mission to bring healing and peace to the world.

But this is not an easy path. People aren't as big on peace as we are on stability and control. Sometimes even the most well intended people have sacrificed the peace that Jesus offers to the broken and hurting masses of this world for the stability and control of the likes of Pilate and Caesar. It's not always intentional or malevolent. Sometimes we simply want things to be the same because it's easier and predictable. Like going to your favorite restaurant because you know what you're going to get.

But there are also times when one group's stability and control can lead to others' suffering.

Father Lyndon Harris was the Episcopal priest at St. Paul's Chapel in Lower Manhattan at the time that 9/11 happened. The Chapel stands just across the street from where the Twin Towers fell. Miraculously, not even a window of the church was damaged in the devastation. Father Harris had been there for just a few months, but came to believe the chapel had escaped destruction for one purpose: to be "a refuge for the people in the pit at Ground Zero."

He spontaneously opened the chapel for all the tens of thousands of firefighters, police officers and sniffer dogs, soldiers, and steel workers, who came to work and seek survivors in the ruble. When the President called for a nationwide bell ringing, St Paul's bell tower was opened. The bell was hit with a huge iron pipe. Twelve times the bell was struck, and all around the white dust of the dead from the two towers swirled around. For a brief moment, the roar of heavy machinery paused Ground Zero, then complete silence, with workers kneeling in prayer among the ashes.

Lyndon Harris organized food and beverages, free for everyone at Ground Zero, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The steel workers welded huge

grills so more people could be served. Over a million meals were served in 8 months, by hundreds of dedicated volunteers. When the city Health Department found out about the efforts, they tried to shut the operation down, telling them they didn't have the right permits or equipment. Some of the inspectors came through jamming meat thermometers into burgers trying to find any reason to shut them down. The police officers being served by St. Paul's, pushed them away and the feeding went on. As time went on, New York's top restaurants and hotel kitchens chefs joined the efforts. Members of the community organized several thousand volunteers who flocked to St. Paul's: Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, atheists, Sikhs, Hindus all came to serve the relief workers at Ground Zero. As word spread, boxes of donations arrived – clothes, socks, soap, chocolate, underwear, pillows, and blankets. Food arrived for the search dogs, and overshoes on their paws.

The church was full of workers sleeping in emergency beds and on benches; massages were offered for those who strained their backs after hours of searching through the ash and ruble. The chapel became the triage and emergency room for the burned feet of the 9/11 rescuers. All while Music filled the chapel – jazz, Mozart, Bach. Every day someone played – 'Amazing Grace' and 'Danny Boy'. Letters of support from children streamed in from around the world. One firefighter said that St Paul's became 'heaven's outpost'.

St. Paul's was part of the ministry of a much larger Episcopal Church just down the street. The senior pastor of the church, who oversaw the ministry at St. Paul's had been away with family when 9/11 happened. He returned from vacation to find St. Paul's Chapel overtaken by piles of donations, volunteers, and food. Rather than congratulate Father Harris on his work in the face of tragedy, he demanded that someone be held accountable for the 'utter mess' of what was a beautiful chapel. The mess he was talking about was the filthy, the exhausted, the weary and wounded seeking refuge in the safety of St. Paul's. "Who are all these strange people?" the Rector asked. "When will St. Paul's once again be a church? Harris replied, "We have never been more the church!"

Harris was told the church's liability insurance did not cover his activities at Ground Zero. Some in leadership were more concerned about control and stability than dealing with the messy needs of hurting people. Eventually,

they implemented a ‘protective custody order’ that effectively closed the chapel to relief work, and returned it to a ‘beautiful place of worship’.

Lyndon Harris was fired a year later. His efforts to follow Jesus and bring peace and wholeness to a community in need of healing went unrewarded. The story of his leadership in the shadow of 9/11 is not documented in the Chapel’s massive display about that time. Others who follow the same God failed to see the beauty in the redemption of the broken, the hurting, the helpers who, whether they knowingly followed Jesus, were part of that Jesus parade of peace and healing too.

Friends, following Jesus is not always easy. It is a journey that opens our hearts and minds to the suffering of the world. Jesus calls us to embrace the messiness, the suffering we see in others and our own suffering, so that more of the world receives hope and peace. Jesus invites us to call out to him our deepest needs and trust that he will respond with what we need.

This week, we will journey with Jesus through Jerusalem. We will witness how he was mistreated, misjudged, and condemned to die, all for bringing good news to the poor, restoring sight to the blind, finding the lost, healing the sick, and releasing those held captive to sin and death. The truth is the world isn’t always interested in such an effort. It’s easier to promote safety and order through displays of power, and expect the masses to fall in line. But following Jesus reveals that true safety and order is found when we know and care for our neighbors, ensuring that everyone can receive the healing Jesus offers. It is not always the popular or easiest thing, but choosing to follow Jesus along with his ragamuffin band of disciples will make us and the world whole again. Amen.