

Sermon: March Madness
Scripture: Luke 19:28-40
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: March 20, 2016

This is a rich time to enter into Holy Week, to consider these ancient Christian scriptures alongside our modern American lives in the 21st century, for we too are in the midst of frenzied crowds these days not so far removed from the ancient crowds of Jerusalem who gathered there for the festival of Passover. March is a time many of us gather in droves into the coliseums of modern day America or park ourselves in-front of the TV altar to watch our college basketball teams compete for the glory. The energy level is through the roof as we cheer for or against the young men who – in certain instances, like sacrificial lambs - take the court. There's a reason they call it March Madness for there is a certain madness or frenzy about the games and the crowds that attend and how exciting or devastating it can be to watch, for instance, a 10 seed beat a 2 seed; like how today Virginia Commonwealth University is going to beat Oklahoma!

And in our American coliseums we are also these days gathering into sometimes frenzied crowds to hear our favorite political candidates and we have noticed with concern, some of us, a certain madness attending that march to the White House as well, with inflammatory rhetoric and protests and slogan-chanting crowds eager for their candidate to win and for the other candidate to be shamed or at least to lose. Our media increases the fervor of it all and some crowds are feeling vindicated, excited and proud and other crowds, confused, defeated and worried and everyone on edge and anxious about the outcome of it all.

So it is with this march madness backdrop that we come together this Sunday in our own little crowd, not quite as amped up and frenzied, thankfully, to hear the story of Jesus, himself, in the crowds and madness of Jerusalem at the turn of the first millennium. It was a crazy time there too, the time of year when Jews from all over the known world came to the holy city to celebrate Passover, to pay their temple taxes, to make sacrifices to God, to party and compete. And surely there was a good amount of politicking going on in and around that city at the time, people

vying for favor and position, power and privilege, even if the Holy Roman Empire, the greatest superpower of the time, seemed irrevocably enthroned in power.

But in the midst of all that there was something small and strange happening just east of the city, between the city walls and the Mount of Olives. It's told a little differently in the Gospel of Luke than it is elsewhere. There was a crowd, Luke writes, but a smallish one of disciples and followers and curiosity seekers around this Jewish man from Galilee, called by some the Messiah and others a revolutionary and still others a madman. And this Jewish man was riding on a small colt or donkey towards Jerusalem and a group of people, a little crazed-seeming, were laying their cloaks before him and saying that he was a king, singing and crying out "here comes the King! The one who comes in the name of the Lord!" To an outsider they would have seemed like they had lost it, like crazed Duke fans, I mean, they were seriously "feeling the bern" for this man, crying and shouting and telling everyone to make way for the Savior of the world??!

And it was especially strange, this humble procession, compared with what the city had likely just witnessed coming from the other direction – biblical scholars Borg and Crossan remind us - and that was Pilate arriving into the city through the Western gates, with enormous pomp and circumstance, mounted on a cavalry charger, with legions of soldiers flanking him, maybe their hats said "Making Israel Great Again!" I don't know, but certainly entering in glamorous attire, dramatically, triumphantly, displaying wealth and might and power for all to see! Now that was an entrance to behold!

In light of that, Jesus' approach must have seemed silly. Pilate and his entourage were awesome and awe-inspiring! Jesus on his donkey, not so much. Pilate had wealth and power and position that made him untouchable to the common man. Jesus had no wealth, basically the cloak on his body, and the most unsavory of people touched him all the time. Pilate was an elite of the world's greatest empire, he was a hard-working, a land and people-owning prefect of Rome and Jesus, well he was a nobody homeless person who wondered around with only what he could carry, feeding off the system some would say, maybe not even paying the taxes he owed to Rome.

They both entered the city that week and amazingly they would meet. Pilate would judge Jesus barely worth his time to execute and by week's end this donkey-rider Savior would be publicly executed as a criminal, a scrap of a human being pinned to a cross and disposed of!

But despite all this, note that it is not for the mighty and awesome Pilate that you and I gather into a crowd this Sunday morning and wave our palm branches, but for this poor Jew who rode toward Jerusalem that day on a donkey. And we and millions and millions of others like us across this world remember not the feasts that Pilate had with his legions in the great halls of Jerusalem that week but the meager meal that Jesus had with just a few of his followers in some upper room on a nondescript Jerusalem street. And we don't think a minute about the journey that Pilate and his Roman legions took in leaving Jerusalem at the end of that holiday, but we've contemplated for lifetimes, the *via dolorosa*, the way of sorrow that Jesus walked through the streets of Jerusalem to Golgotha. And we have not a whit of knowledge about what happened for the rest of the days of Pilate's life after that week, he lived much longer than Jesus did, but we know, and feel as intimately as though it were our own, the end of Jesus' days and his death that took place on that hill, a death that changed everything... a death that changed everything.

So therefore in this time and in this age, in these march days of madness, let us not to forget which story we belong to, which King it is before whom we kneel. We are not saved or doomed based upon who becomes the next president of the United States. The world's salvation does not depend on worldly power holders. Our way forward is not forged through systems where the victory and rise of some comes at the defeat and expense of others. We do not bow down in awe before the sparkling Pilates of this world, but we, here in this crowd, kneel in reverence before the man on the donkey, the victim on the cross.

So do not be transfixed by the mob or drawn up into the fears of the crowd, nor elated or deflated by the victories and defeats of this world, the rising and falling of powers, for all of this is momentary and fleeting. Instead, let us be transfixed by the cross and drawn up into the passion of Jesus's love. Let our heads hang low at the ruin of innocent life and at our complicity in systems that bless the high and

mighty Pilates of the world and curse the lowly Jesus-es. At least for this week let our hosanna's be replaced by confessions, let our victories taste hollow if they come at the expense of others, let us remember that our ways are not God's ways necessarily, our judgments of others are likely not God's judgment of them and remember for one more week the ashes we smudged on our foreheads about 6 weeks ago to begin Lent, for now we take the last leg of the journey which brings us to the dirty ashen cross, at the foot of which we stand and watch and wait to see what life and goodness God can weave out of even this great sorrow and defeat.