**An Empire of Hope** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Palm/Passion Sunday The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Mark 11:1-11 Saint Paul, Minnesota
March 24, 2024

On March 7, 1965, approximately 600 African Americans began a march from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery in support of voting rights. As they attempted to peacefully cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, they were brutally attacked and beaten by state troopers and local lawmen. Broadcast live across the nation, *“Bloody Sunday”* triggered national outrage. Martin Luther King Jr., who had not been present for the march, issued a call for religious leaders to join in a peaceful, nonviolent march for freedom on Tuesday, March 9. People from across the nation descended upon Selma to join him.

March 9 arrived and a crowd of thousands followed King from downtown Selma to the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Reaching the site of the Sunday attack, King and the marchers knelt to pray. After several minutes, King stood and, much to the surprise of those gathered, led the marchers back to Selma.

Many were critical of King’s unexpected decision to turn the march around, to not press ahead toward confrontation on the road to Montgomery. They had come to march, not simply to pray and return to Selma. Two weeks would pass before King finally led the five-day march from Selma to Montgomery, this time with federal protection.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In a similar way, Jesus’ last week in Jerusalem is full of *confrontation.* He enters in a way that is purposefully conspicuous, his homespun parade a kind of counterprogramming to the imperial show of force in Pilate’s procession into town. The next day Jesus disrupts the buying and selling and money-changing in the temple, and in the days following, religious leaders come at him repeatedly trying to discredit him and get him into trouble. But all of this confrontation begins with a sign of *peace:* Jesus rides into town on a borrowed colt or donkey—[depending on which Gospel you are reading], recalling Zechariah’s promise of the humble king, riding not a war horse but a donkey; the king who would *“command peace to the nations.”*

In fact, Jesus confronts and disrupts *all* of the domination systems that harm, corrupt, or diminish the wholeness of God’s good creation and all of its people—not just on Palm Sunday but in his whole ministry, with his whole life. Jesus confronts and disrupts—*with a sign of peace.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Why is this important to understand? Because Jesus’ *death* is incomprehensible without a clear understanding of his *life.*

Think of it this way:

Imagine, if you will, celebrating the annual Martin Luther King Jr. holiday simply by fixing once again on King’s death. Over and over again we would replay the film footage of his assassination at the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis. Scholars and preachers might focus on his final twelve hours, his last meal, what he wore, his dying words. They might reflect on the significance of the weapon that killed him, his time of death, or the sort of casket in which he was laid out. Perhaps the actual moment of his death could be recreated and filmed. Imagine spending the holiday like this, *all the while saying nothing about King’s life.* No interest in his great manifesto, *“I Have a Dream.”* No concern for such great prophecies as the *“Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”* Not a word about civil rights, desegregation, the Vietnam War, or King’s vision of peace and justice in a world torn by violence and hatred. *To celebrate his death apart from the cause for which he lived would be ridiculous and meaningless.”*

And yet this is what we have done for the most part with Jesus. For most Christians the *Apostles’ Creed* is quite sufficient: *Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.* After the Virgin Birth we leap over Jesus’ life to take in his death in all its significance, *as if* it could be significant without a life to make it so.

But so it has become to us: his death is the sacrifice that ensures our forgiveness before a God torn between anger and compassion.

What need do we have, then, of his *life* if it is his *death* that ensures our salvation?

*But this was not so for the earliest friends and followers of Jesus.* They were profoundly devoted to his way of life, and they used his death to call attention to his life. They did not see his death or resurrection as isolated events significant in themselves alone. *(Rather) they were the fitting end of a life of extraordinary power and vision, a life to be embraced and remembered.* In fact, virtually every word spoken about the death of Jesus among his first followers was calculated to resurrect the significance of Jesus’ life for those who loved him and would come to love him in the years ahead. They spoke of the movement he began as *“the way”—*his way of life.[[3]](#footnote-3)

But what exactly was *his way of life?*

Let’s review: Jesus was born into an eastern province of Rome’s vast empire during the reign of Augustus. The spirit of these times for Romans was deeply religious. The *Pax Romana,* [built on brute force, military occupation, and a sophisticated patronage system that funneled tribute from the conquered poor to Rome through well connected elites] for them, the reign of Augustus was no ordinary time. It was the *golden age* foreseen in ages past as that great time of blessing and peace foreordained by the gods and destined to descend once again upon the god’s chosen people. The Roman peace was not a secular accomplishment: it was the gift of the gods. It was a reward for virtuous living.[[4]](#footnote-4)

And at the center of this new and glorious age was Augustus himself. It was he who established the peace, he secured the borders, he who added province after province to the greater glory and enrichment of Rome. Moreover, it was he who, personally, carried the favor of the gods. He became in the popular imagination nothing less than a messenger of the gods—*God’s own son.*

But Jesus and his family were not part of the empire—they were too poor to participate in the patronage system. They lived on its margins, piecing together a subsistence living by working with their hands. In his company we find other such folk, similarly marginal to empire: fishermen, prostitutes, lepers, beggars, persons disabled by life, the demon-possessed. They belonged to that category of persons the anthropologist, Gerhard Lenski, calls *“expendables.”*

Being expendable to the empire was in itself no crime. An expendable is an irrelevance. *But Jesus turned out to be no ordinary expendable.* He took cognizance of his situation and began to reflect on it. *He began to speak of another empire, an empire for all the beggars, the hungry, the depressed, and the persecuted in his world, an empire of peace, not force.* He began to speak of a new future, in which those who are first in the present order of things would be last, and the last would be first. He spoke of this new empire in ideal, utopian terms as God’s empire. But it was not an empire whose reality was never to be known in the here and now. To the contrary, it is already spread out upon the earth; people just do not see it yet. [[5]](#footnote-5)

*This sort of talk was a crime.* Why, after all, speak of another empire, an empire that would truly be *“of God,”* if there is nothing wrong with the empire bestowed by the gods through the auspices of the divine Caesar, Augustus? Jesus was an expendable who contemplated his situation and that of those around him, and dared to imagine a new world in which he and his were not expendable after all.[[6]](#footnote-6)

And crucifixion was in Jesus’ day Rome’s trademark means of executing peasants involved in seditious activity against the empire. Crucifixion was highly organized, massive state terrorism, intended to intimidate the vast peasant and slave populations of the empire into passivity.

What does this tell us about the death of Jesus? It tells us that *his executioners were Roman, not Jewish.* To be sure, Rome could not control a province like Judea without high-level local collaboration. But in Jesus’ day the high priesthood would have been co-opted entirely by Rome. But this does not get Pilate off the hook. The cross of Jesus was a Roman cross. History cannot get any plainer than this. One of the great ironies (and tragedies) of history, it turns out, is that for centuries Gentile Christians have blamed Jews for the death of Jesus, when in fact it was a Gentile official of a Gentile state who had Jesus, a Jew, executed like so many other Jews of his day.

It also tells us that his crime was sedition *against the Roman state.* This implication is often dismissed on the grounds that Jesus’ message was a “religious” one, not “political.” But in the ancient world there was no such distinction between religion and politics. The empire was divinely ordained, the emperor God’s son. Worship was to the gods Roma and Augustus. In Judea, Roman tribute may even have been collected in collaboration with the high priest.

And so Jesus could not speak of a new kingdom, an empire of God, without implicating the religious *and*  political structures that dominated his life. In fact, the preaching of Jesus undermined these structures completely. The suspicion that his ideas were seditious to the Roman Empire was not mistaken.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Barbara Brown Taylor put it this way:

*“Jesus was not killed by atheism and anarchy. He was brought down by law and order allied with religion, which is always a deadly mix. Beware of those who claim to know the mind of God and who are prepared to use force, if necessary, to make others conform. Beware those who cannot tell God’s will from their own.”*

How does one find meaning in a death so violent and repulsive, so wrenching and depressing? This was the challenge faced by Jesus’ first followers. No doubt, many of those who were with him disappeared into the crowd after this. The terror of the cross had done its work. *But some did not disappear. They did not give up. They got through the tragedy and horror of the moment, and then began to consider it.* They considered it in light of all Jesus had meant to them, in light of the Jewish tradition, and in light of what they were beginning to experience again. *Jesus had been killed, but his spirit was not dead yet.* The tragedy of Jesus’ death was not the final word. Words began to transform it into something else altogether: something definitive for who they would become; something that would give purpose to their lives; something that would redeem them from despair. *The death of a nobody was not nothing after all.[[8]](#footnote-8)*

Friends, as we walk together through Holy Week, make a point *not* to skip directly from the parade of Palm Sunday to the Resurrection on Easter. Consider the events of Maundy Thursday (the Last Supper) in light of Passover—a celebration of Israel’s *liberation* from slavery in Egypt and how threatening this was to Rome, how Jesus’ preaching about another kingdom, an empire of hope, was perceived to be a direct challenge to Rome, and how it led to the events of Good Friday and his execution. But also how Jesus’ life—his words, his deeds, and his fate point *the would-be follower of Jesus*—as a life to be embraced as *the* life, and a fate to call one’s own.

1. Matthew A. Rich, [Commentary on] *Palm Sunday,* March 24, 2024, The Presbyterian Outlook, March 11, 2024 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yvette Schock, *Confronting Difference in a Spirit of Peace,* The Christian Century, March 22, 2024 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Stephen J. Patterson, *Beyond the Passion: Rethinking the Death and Life of Jesus,* Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2004, pp. 3, 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., p. 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., pp. 21, 22 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., pp. 8, 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., p. 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)