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“Who Do You Say I Am: Son of David, Prince of Peace”
April 17, 2011, Palm Sunday
Matthew 21:1-11

At the heart of the Palm Sunday story is a clash of images and of words: Jesus riding humbly on a donkey – into a walled city protected by a Roman garrison with armor and swords. A King of the Jews with no money and a few disciples entering into the city presided over by King Herod with his army and throne of gold. And on that day, the crowd called Jesus the Son of David, linking him to King David of old, hoping he would rally the people to chase out the hated Romans, whose military barracks literally overshadowed the sacred temple mount. But this same Jesus paused before entering Jerusalem, not to bask in the glory of the crowd’s adulation but to weep over the city and say, “If you, even you, [Jerusalem], had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace” (Lk 19:41). So is he the Son of David or the Prince of Peace? Can we resolve this clash of images and clash of words?

Over the past few Sundays, we have seen how Jesus has been given different titles throughout history. To the first Christians, he was the Christ, the Messiah, and Holy One of God. To the early church and apostle Paul, he was the Savior of the world, the one bringing together Jew and Gentile. During the fall of the Roman Empire, St. Augustine and others named Jesus Son of God, the fully human, fully divine Lord whose kingdom is truer than any earthly kingdom. During the 6th century, to St. Benedict Jesus was the Heavenly Monk who calls us to live holy lives, distinct from the unholy ways of the world. In the Middle Ages, Jesus was the Crucified Lord whose suffering offered comfort during the long years of war and plagues. During the Renaissance, the resurrected Jesus inspired a rebirth of humanity. During the Reformation, the Life-Giving Lord led Reformers like John Calvin to proclaim how Jesus challenges us to live out our faith in every aspect of our daily lives, not just in church on Sunday. But after the Renaissance and Reformation came Revolutions: the American Revolution, the French Revolution, all culminating in the century just past, the bloodiest century in human history where was claimed 50, 60, perhaps 100 million people, depending on who’s counting.

So which Jesus do we proclaim today: The Son of David, Israel’s strongest military leader whose army won victories over enemies, or the Prince of Peace, who wept over a city before entering it humbly on a donkey with a handful of followers? Is it possible to follow a Jesus who is known by both titles? To feel confused over this question is nothing new. It leads to dark humor, such as when Will Rogers said, “You can’t say civilization don’t advance. In every war they kill you in a new way.” Will Rogers also said, “Now if there’s one thing America does worse than any other nation, it is try and manage somebody else’s affairs.” That was said 90 years before our current nation-building adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Son of David – Prince of Peace. Over the centuries, people of sincere faith have made their case for one side of this equation over the other. 1) The Conquering Son of David: Stressing that human violence is as old as Cain and Abel, some Christians insist we must wage war in order to gain peace, that we are forced to confront dictators and

tyrants in order to curb their bloodthirsty aggression, and that we are forced to articulate what a “just war” looks like even if it means putting weapons into hands of peacekeepers. 2) The humble Prince of Peace: People of equally sincere faith believe Christ calls us to lives of pacifism and non-violent resistance to evil, and that it is morally abhorrent to take anyone’s life since doing so aligns us more closely with the crucifiers of the world than with the one crucified for the world.

There is no way to resolve this Palm Sunday impasse. As is often the case in the bible, we best navigate the tension between opposite positions by moving from the cosmic to the particular; by focusing not on abstract philosophy but real people with real spiritual needs. So this day see once more the walled city of Jerusalem, the crowds and the Roman guards with their armor, swords and power – and see the Mount of Olives, where a rabbi from Nazareth paused to weep and then rode a donkey in the city gate.

Pay attention to the other details from Palm Sunday. Imagine the sound of the donkey’s hooves on the stones and how its tail whisks away the flies. See the colors in the robes and garments that form an impromptu carpet on the road. Hear the sound of the branches being waved and the waves of sound as people shout “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” Now freeze that scene for a moment and pull it into the 21st century, into America and where you are today.

What is the American setting for the Palm Sunday entrance of the Son of David, Prince of Peace? America is a global superpower. Our economic output is between 20-30% of the entire world’s economy. We have 750 military bases in 130 countries, covering 2/3rds of the modern world. Globally nations spend about \$1.5 trillion a year on military and defense, with the U.S. spending over half of that amount all by itself.¹ Having said that, it is hard to measure the true costs of sustaining our current military-industrial complex. It is even harder to measure what the emotional, personal and ethical costs are for our current military policies. But two simple things can be said this Palm Sunday: 1) A superpower that insists on absolute security for itself only succeeds in making all other nations insecure.² 2) We will only ever be truly safe when others are not frightened of us, when others do not feel silenced, despised, or threatened by us.³

Go further now. What is the Pennsylvania setting for the Palm Sunday entrance of the Son of David, Prince of Peace? Pennsylvania is one of 34 states that has the death penalty for some crimes. We have the 4th highest number of people on death row, behind California, Florida, and Texas. Our 222 death row inmates amount to 3x more than in Oklahoma and 4x more than in Mississippi. Since the penalty was reinstated in 1974, three people have been executed, while six have been found innocent and set free; and assuredly other innocent men and women risk possible execution at the hands of our commonwealth. The Presbyterian Church has condemned capital punishment in statements going back to 1959, calling it “an expression of vengeance which contradicts the justice of God.”⁴ To me, to execute anyone while claiming allegiance to Christ, himself a victim of capital punishment, is a fatally flawed spiritual contradiction.

Go further: What is the Pittsburgh setting for the Palm Sunday entrance of the Son of David, Prince of Peace? So far this year, there have been 24 homicides in Pittsburgh, of which 20 of the victims were black men and women. The racial disparity present in

capital punishment is even more pronounced in relation to street violence and death by gunfire. Many of you signed petitions last Sunday to call for stronger legislation regulating gun sales and to enforce the gun control laws currently on the books. Later this month, from April 28 to May 1, Pittsburgh will host the NRA national convention, bringing over 60,000 people to our city. A faith-based march will take place on April 30 to provide a witness to the convention attendees. It is time to proclaim that following the Prince of Peace is fundamentally at odds with packing a piece.

It is possible to feel overwhelmed in any conversation about faith, war, violence and peace. It is easy to believe there is nothing we can do, as billions of dollars are spent each day on projects and munitions without asking our advice, as gun shows and conventions fill city coffers, and as street shootings and gun violence fill city coffins. But on Palm Sunday, we are not asked to solve everything. We are only asked to walk beside this prophet Jesus from Nazareth. To stick close enough to him to hear the donkey's hooves on the cobblestones; to see the faces in the crowd, the children running alongside; to hear the shouts both outside and inside the city walls – echoing off the Antonia Fortress where the Roman soldiers were housed; echoing off the walls of the Temple where religious leaders worried about this Galilean rabbi; and seek to do whatever you can, wherever Christ leads you, to put his gospel into practice.

Can we stick that close to Jesus? Close enough so we will see people as unique individuals and not lump them into categories? Close enough so we will learn people's names and hear their stories? Close enough so we can give food, lend a hand, work for peace, and receive a hug or a grateful smile in return? Stick close to Jesus and know that it wasn't David's might long ago that made Jesus the Son of David on Palm Sunday. It was God's promise to be with us no matter what – as God promised to Noah, Moses, Abraham and Sarah, and to David – that is the good news revealed through Jesus' Palm Sunday parade. And the tears wept by the Prince of Peace were never tears shed out of weakness or passivity. Rather the tears were shed out of love – a love willing to enter into other's pain, loss, and brokenness – our pain, loss, and brokenness – knowing that only by that Palm Sunday entry, Good Friday crucifixion, and Easter resurrection could the brokenness finally be healed.

Don't watch Palm Sunday from afar. Don't analyze it or romanticize it from a distance. Walk Palm Sunday this day, and every day; close enough to hear, see, and sense the clash of opposites it both represents and overcomes. Jesus, David's Son, is also the Prince of Peace. There is no way ahead except to walk forward by faith, sticking as close to Christ as possible. And then the Palm Sunday beatitude will be spoken of each of us: Blessed are you who come in the name of the Lord!

AMEN

¹ Gary Dorrien, "For Alternatives to War and Militarism," To Do Justice: A Guide for Progressive Christians, ed. Rebecca Todd Peters & Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, 2008, pp. 108-117. Statistics also compared with information found online/Google searches.

² Ibid., p. 115.

³ Paraphrased, Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, *The Christian Century*, May 3, 2003, p. 7.

⁴ Minutes of the 190th General Assembly (1978).