

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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APRIL 1, 2007



Luke 19:28-48

"O, Jerusalem!"

The OT ends with prophecies: that the "day of the LORD" will come, that "the messenger" will announce its coming, that "the LORD you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant whom you desire..." (Malachi 3). 400 years would elapse until, as Luke the historian says, "in the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor, Herod was tetrarch of Galilee... during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas... the word of God came to John, son of Zachariah, in the desert" (Luke 3:1-2).

In that long interval, history did not, of course, stand still, and nor did Jewish spiritual thinking. The return from the Babylonian exile had been what you might call half-successful: the Second Temple had been partially built, but the monarchy had not been restored, and God's people were not free – at least not for long. Waves of conquerors from Persia, Greece, Syria, Egypt, Parthia, Rome had overrun "Judea" – the homeland of the Jews, as they were now called. Briefly the Maccabees had cleansed the Temple, restored the monarchy and the high priesthood. But the hunger grew for a true king to arise from the house of David, for the chosen people to be freed from pagan rule, for the "shekinah-glory" to return to the Temple and for God's presence to be felt in their midst. It hadn't happened, and every 1st C. Jew knew it. The Herod family were corrupt Roman puppets, not Davidic "kings

of the Jews." Even their land was no longer called Israel, but the derogatory name Palestine, evoking the name of the ancient Philistines.

1) *The King Is Coming*

So when Jesus the prophet from Nazareth decides to ride into Jerusalem for Passover, nobody has any doubt what it means. Zechariah's prophecy is coming true: "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion; shout, Daughter of Jerusalem; See, your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation; gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zech 9:9). No wonder the crowds cheer: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the LORD!" "Hosanna to the son of David." The Pharisees criticize Jesus for encouraging the people; but as he says, this is a day for the children and the very stones to cry out – this is "The Day."

In the middle of the celebration that "the king is coming," we are amazed to find not only the Pharisees' criticism, but Jesus' sadness. In all the gospel narratives, Jesus is in tears only twice: once at the grave of his friend Lazarus, and once on this day as he rides down the Mount of Olives and sees the city of Jerusalem laid out before him. "Jesus weeps, and says: "If you only knew on this day what would bring you peace... but it is hidden from you." Jerusalem, whose very

name means "city of peace," does not grasp what the coming of their king means.

For too many, it meant the dream that at last they could be free of Rome, and return to nationhood and sovereignty. The leaders - the priests and the Sanhedrin, especially the Pharisees - wanted it no less than the people, but were more pragmatic; at this point, they helped the Romans keep the peace, and their positions, by arresting trouble-makers like this Galilean. "It is better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish" said Caiaphas the High Priest, saying far more than he knew.

But as its leaders rejected Jesus, Jerusalem took a direction that would prove fatal. Instead of embracing the Prince of Peace, they opted for nationalism, which could only lead to war with Rome. What they got over the next 30 years were riots that grew in number and intensity, the founding of the Zealot Party, then in the mid-60s the First Jewish Revolt and the capture by Jewish revolutionary groups of numerous Roman strongholds including Masada, Tiberias, Caesarea, and the Antonia fortress in Jerusalem. And so came what Josephus called "The Jewish War," as 60,000 Roman legionaries under Vespasian and then Titus brutally recaptured territory, eventually in 70 AD sacking and burning Jerusalem and tearing down all but one wall of the Temple - which you can visit to this day.

What the leaders of 30 AD could not accept was that Jesus' arrival in the city *was* "the return of the LORD to Zion." From the earliest days of Jesus' ministry, this theme had resounded. "Blessed be God, who has visited and redeemed his people" said John the Baptist's father Zachariah. "God has come to help his people" said the crowds, when Jesus raised a widow's son. But on Palm Sunday, as Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, he laments that the city "does not recognize the time of God's coming." It is a moment of crisis, a moment of opportunity, a moment of choice. "If you only knew," said Jesus.

2) O, Jerusalem!

He had said as much before, but nobody had listened: "O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" (Luke 13:34).

O, Jerusalem! Do you not see what you are choosing? You are choosing war, not peace, and soon "your enemies will surround your walls, and dash you and your children to the ground.. they will not leave one stone on another." Jerusalem's leaders are once again ready to kill one of God's prophets, and "*this* generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets... from Abel to Zechariah, who have died between the sanctuary and the altar..." (Luke 11:50-51). And because this is not just "one more prophet," but the Son of the Owner of the vineyard, and he will now "come now and kill the tenants and give the vineyard to others" (Luke 20:14-16).

O, Jerusalem, "how I long to gather you as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings." We find that a tender metaphor, but the historians tell us that it was more than that: the picture, they say, is of a hen sheltering her chicks from a barnyard fire... when it is over, the hen is dead, but the chicks are alive under her wings. Little do Jerusalem and her leaders know that Jesus who weeps over them will himself bear the firestorm so that they can survive - *if* they will shelter under *his* wings! But for the most part, they will not, and his suffering at the hands of the Romans will only be the first taste of what Rome will bring on them all within a generation.

3) The LORD Comes To His Temple

But Jesus' symbolic actions and words about the fate of Jerusalem are not over yet. He has one more act to accomplish, right at the start. The King has come to his city; the Lord is coming to his Temple. Jesus finds the outer courts are full of people buying and selling

and exchanging money – all valuable services: proper coins for the Temple offering, animals without blemish for the sacrifices. But this was the Court of the Gentiles, the place where the Lord had promised through Isaiah: “My house will be a house of prayer for all nations” (Is 56:7). In the restored post-exilic Temple, *all nations* would be welcome, and all foreigners and eunuchs and cripples and the blind and the deaf and the lame would be included in the people who worshipped God; and Israel would rediscover her calling to be “*a light to the Gentiles*” (Is 42:6, 49:6).

But instead of being a light, the Court of the Gentiles had become a “den of thieves” – which as Jeremiah had foretold, was not simply a matter of financial dishonesty. It was about a people who trusted in the Temple, who thought that as long as it stood in their midst, no harm would come to them, even when in their midst was a “den of thieves” - a “band of *lestai*” – a Greek word that means “one who robs with violence,” and was used over and over in the 1st C. to refer to brigands, bandits, zealots, revolutionaries. Barabbas was one of the “*lestai*.” The Temple’s “den of thieves” was not just a home to those who cheated worshippers of money, but to the priests and Pharisees who wanted armed revolt against Rome.

So Jesus’ actions with the money tables are more than a “cleansing” of the Temple; they are also a symbolic judgment the Temple and its leadership. One scholar has noted that, at least for a while, Jesus shut down the entire sacrificial system. Jeremiah makes clear what everyone should have heard in Jesus’ words: “see what I did to Shiloh where you used to worship me,” says the LORD; “I will do the same to your precious temple.” (Jer 7:12-15). Jesus is passing verdict on the Temple, and predicting that it will be destroyed “within this generation.” *He, Jesus*, and the little group gathering around him, will be the true “presence of God” among his people. The Temple and the sacrifices will no longer be needed, because *Jesus* is the presence of God and the atoning sacrifice for sin.

4) *What Makes For Peace?*

So what “makes for peace” for us on this Palm Sunday? Planning how much military strength we should project where, for how long and at what cost? Becoming more aggressive diplomats who make good things happen? Hoping we can elect the right people to power, here and elsewhere?

What would make for peace in our nation, in the church, in our community, in your home? Is there room in our country, and especially in “the Lord’s house,” for “all nations” – for the foreigners and the crippled and the blind? What about the dependent and the handicapped - physically and mentally and emotionally? Is “the Lord’s house” – the community centered on Jesus now, not a building – a place of prayer, or of commerce, or plotting to take over power? Is the church of Jesus Christ a battlefield over who is allowed in? Is peace in the church to be found by marketing, or by prayer; by power politics, or by becoming devoted disciples of Jesus who know they are called to be “the light of the world”?

What would make for peace in our community? More of the “blame game” over school budgets, or a return to trusting people and letting them get on with the jobs we elect or hire them to do? What would make for peace in your home? Someone “taking charge,” or everyone deciding to let one another develop in their own way to become the people God has called *them* to be?

What makes for peace? If you only knew, said Jesus. It means above all accepting him as Lord, serving him and not our own agendas, learning what to trust and to have faith are all about (neither of them can possibly mean “to be in control”!). It means grasping, with deep gratitude and reverence, that we are only chicks sheltering under his wings; that he has been through the flames to protect us, and that we need to trust him for safety and direction for us, for our families, for our church, for our communities.

As we remember again “the Return of the King” this Holy Week and Easter, may you and I remember that although he is the ruler who comes in humility, who is easy to ignore or underestimate, he is in fact the Lord, who deserves our worship.

Let us pray...