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Spirit of Grace Lutheran-Methodist Church
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Luke 19:28-45 – Palm Sunday

As Jesus entered Jerusalem on the day we now celebrate as Palm Sunday, another entrance parade was happening on the other side of the city. Jerusalem was occupied by the Roman Empire, and as such were subject to its laws and taxes and military enforcement. And while the Roman occupying forces always had a presence in the city, their numbers increased dramatically every year when the Jewish people would gather to celebrate the Passover festival. The Roman leaders saw this as the most risky and volatile time in the city, as the Jewish people journeyed from all over to gather and celebrate a festival of freedom and liberation. For the Jewish people, Passover was the time during which they remembered and honored how God liberated them from slavery in Egypt under the oppression of Pharaoh, and celebrated the ways in which God continues to rescue the Jewish people and restore them into right relationship with YHWH. The stories shared during this time were ones that were all too similar to their current oppression under the forces of Roman, and combined with the number of people who made pilgrimage to Jerusalem to be present for this festival, Passover became a time when the ruling forces felt a palpable threat from the power of the people. So in order to intimidate the people into complacency, the Roman governor of Judea would also journey to Jerusalem at this time every year to take up residence during the festival, bringing with him a large number of soldiers and cavalry to quell any riots or uprisings that might occur. The Jewish people knew well that Pilate was not afraid to use violence to enforce the might and rule of the empire – earlier in the gospel of Luke we heard it recounted to Jesus how Pilate slaughtered a gathering of Galileans who had gathered for worship together. And so, every year in preparation for the Passover festival, Pilate and his military parade would enter Jerusalem with great pomp and fanfare, displaying the might and power of the Roman imperial forces, reminding the people of Jerusalem who really held the power in their city of peace.

This year, however, another parade of a different kind of power is held on the opposite end of the city. The people have been hearing about this up and coming Rabbi – a teacher and miracle worker of extraordinary power, rumored to be Promised One from God who will come to bring them true and lasting liberation at long last. Word about his coming spread throughout the city, and they prepared to take to the streets not only to welcome this Jesus person, but to engage in a collective act of resistance and demonstration of defiance against the Roman Empire and their forces of oppression. While today we might have a tamer idea of what the Palm Sunday Parade might have entailed, we have to remember that for these people living under occupation, without the right to peaceably assemble, this was an incredibly subversive, risky action.

Last Saturday, as I prepared my sign to carry at our local gathering of the nationwide “Hands Off” protest, I could not help but notice the similarities between this gathering and the one we celebrate every year before Easter. I thought about how these signs and their messages were our modern day palms, signifying our own resistance to the oppressive forces of our land today. As I walked from where I parked down to the waterfront, I saw others with their own signs making their way to the gathering point. I met someone from Parkdale and we walked over together, chatting about what brought us to the area and why we were showing up to this rally. I arrived early, and there were a few dozen people already gathered. Music played and we danced as more and more people continued to show up. I tried to keep an eye out for folks I knew, but soon I couldn’t even see to the edge of the crowd gathered. As we listened to the speakers and began to march, there was an excitement in the air – a palpable, contagious energy that filled me with a sense of tangible hope. It was hard to really get a feel for how large the crowd was until we made our way over the highway overpass and saw how the people had flooded the streets by the Salmon fountain across from city hall. What I had imagined to be a few hundred people was actually closer to over 1500 people, and I found myself filled with a profound sense of awe and wonder and connection to a movement so much bigger than myself.

I imagine that the people who gathered for the parade of palms to welcome Jesus all those years ago felt similarly. While protests are meant to be a visible sign of resistance against oppression, they are also meant to be a way to strengthen the connection and commitment of the community – to remind us that we are not alone in this fight – that each of us are a necessary part of the struggle for liberation – that we are always stronger when we are united in our mission, working together for the betterment of us all. However, in order for protests to be effective and have their intended effect of lasting change, the people who participate must be willing to not only be involved in the moment, but committed to the mission and movement. It's easy to show up on a single day, join in some chants, wave some signs or some palms, and then simply resume your day to day life with business as usual. It is much more challenging to commit oneself fully and completely to the movement – to be willing to risk safety and stability, life and livelihood, in order to help bring about this new way of life – to follow Jesus all the way to the cross and the tomb.

What happened to the crowd between Palm Sunday and Good Friday? Where did all of their excitement and enthusiasm go? We often simplify the story by saying that the same people who gathered for the parade of palms and shouts of Hosanna were the same people who called for the crucifixion of Jesus only days later. And while I think that might be true for some in the crowd, I also don't think that captures the fullness of the story and its context.

Perhaps some were disappointed by the savior they welcomed into the city, who rode on a donkey rather than a war horse, who spoke of peace and lamented ways of war. Perhaps they had been expecting a war hero like King David to match the might of the Roman Empire, and left that day shaking their heads at the foolishness of this one rumored to be their coming king. This man of miracles and messages might be impressive, but he will surely be no match for the likes of Pilate and Herod and Caesar.

Perhaps others were disillusioned by his methods. Almost immediately after arriving in the city, Jesus enters the Temple and engages in a far less peaceful demonstration by turning over the tables of the vendors and money lenders and evicting them from the Temple. Perhaps some were offended by these disruptive actions, wondering why Jesus would cause a disruption within the Temple when their fight was against these occupying forces.

Likely, many retreated into the fear they had momentarily bypassed to join in the parade. When they returned to daily life and were reminded of the force and power of the imperial forces, perhaps they were reminded of all they had to lose by joining this movement. The message of Jesus sounded nice, but did not seem to come with guarantees. And like how the Israelites in the wilderness at first longed to return to Egypt where at least they had food and shelter, these people too were willing to endure the known oppression of Rome for maintaining the semblance of peace and security they had managed to scrape together.

Perhaps some of these people did join in the chants calling for crucifixion. Perhaps some of them merely stayed at home, hiding away in fear. Regardless, their momentary involvement did not lead to a commitment to the movement. Even the twelve disciples, those most committed to the movement and message of Jesus, did not have what it took to risk themselves and follow Jesus all the way to the cross, to bear witness to the crucifixion even if they could do nothing to prevent it. Though let us not forget the women who did have the courage to accompany Jesus, following him to the cross, beating their chests and wailing in lament, bearing witness to the grief and pain and injustice of it all.

As we enter Holy Week and journey with Jesus to the cross, bearing witness to the violence of forces of empire in our world and the ways in which we are held bound in these ways of sin, may we have the courage to not turn back – to not look away – to not allow our commitment to falter. May we remind ourselves and one another that to be a Christian is not to be involved for a moment, but committed to a movement and a mission. Because this work is not the work of any one individual – not even Jesus Christ. The work of the kingdom of God is the work of us all –and though Good Friday reminds us of the very real powers of evil and sin and violence and empire in our world, our faith calls us back to the empty tomb time and time again to show us that resurrection and new life are just as real and just as powerful. May we always remain committed to living out this belief in our hearts, in our lives, in our communities, and in our world.

May it be so among us, in this time and this place.

Amen.