

City In Turmoil

TEXT: Matthew 21:1-10

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on April 10, 2022

I've been through a lot of Palm Sundays in my life, both inside and outside of ministry. I've heard the stories from each of the gospels many times. Usually, I'm focused on the details of the procession itself since they differ from Gospel to Gospel.

But it was only this week that I noticed the interesting line at the end of Matthew's version of the story: "When [Jesus] entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'"

What's up with that? We know the mood soured later in the week, but right at the end of the parade? Why is Jerusalem in turmoil when Jesus gets off the donkey's back inside the city? Maybe turmoil means they're extra excited? Nope. The Greek word for turmoil there means "shaken in fear." Matthew uses that word four times in his gospel. Here, then again in chapter 27:51 right after Jesus breathes his last. Matthew tells us the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The earth shaking hard enough to split rocks is the same word.

Then Matthew uses it twice more in the next and final chapter—first to describe an earthquake when the angel descends from heaven and rolls away the stone and then again two verses later when Matthew describes the guards at the tomb responding to the angel: "And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men." That's what it felt like in the city when Jesus arrived. It was a city trembling in extreme fear. Why?

For the answer to that question, we have to back up to take the long view of this point in Israel's history. For most of the previous 1,000 years, Israel had been occupied by one empire or another. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, and then, about 60 years before Jesus was born, it was the Romans, who had it for the entire New Testament.

While the Romans allowed for some autonomy in their colonies, the Roman occupation in the first century was an especially bitter pill for Israel. I mentioned that Rome had taken the territory just 60 years before Jesus was born. You know who had been occupying Israel before Rome moved in? Nobody. In all the march of empires across almost a thousand years, Israel finally had managed a successful revolt against Greece in 164 BCE. The revolt was led by the Jewish warrior hero, Judas Maccabeus, securing a hundred years of independence for Israel.

When Jesus was born, the memories of being a free and independent nation were still within living memory, and the sting of being back under foreign occupation had stirred up both political and religious factions of all kinds. One of Jesus' disciples is known as Simon the Zealot. The Zealots were one of those political factions. Jesus has not one but two disciples named Judas, both named for the hero who had led the successful revolt against Greece a century earlier and brought them their freedom.

In first-century Israel, there are political plots going on all over, and the religious landscape is equally fraught. We see the Pharisees fighting with the Sadducees about doctrine, and the Essenes living out in the desert claiming the priests in Jerusalem were corrupt. People claiming to be the

Messiah were fairly common, as some parts of society tried to settle into life as a colony once again and others were determined to regain their freedom by whatever means.

As the center of both political and religious life, the city of Jerusalem wasn't exactly laid back on any given day of Jesus' lifetime. And over the three years of his ministry, a new religious faction had grown up around him. The miracles attracted huge crowds; he cared for those that were on the margins of society, creating a great sense of loyalty. He was a wise teacher with both a thorough knowledge of the Torah and a canny ability to twist a debate to his advantage, which intrigued Pharisees like Nicodemus and frustrated others who felt their power threatened. His disciples came from all walks of life, and their influence was growing.

By the time crowds are meeting Jesus outside the gates with shouts of Hosanna and throwing around Messianic titles like "Son of David," it was clear that many people were coming to believe this might be the guy — this might be not only the new Moses or the new David but the new Judas Maccabaeus, who could galvanize a force to boot the Romans out of Israel and lead the people to a new independence.

This wasn't the first time Jesus had come to Jerusalem. So, when he arrives this time with such fanfare, people take notice. "Who is this?" people ask. Jesus wasn't universally recognized. But when the people who had thronged around his entry responded, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee," it's likely that many thought, "Oh! I've heard of him. Is he really the one? Do I need to sharpen my sword? Is it go-time?"

If you thought the answer to that question was "yes," that would cause shaking indeed. You don't toss out your Roman overlords by politely asking them to leave. Many likely feared that violence was imminent. In a sense it was. Only about 40 years after Jesus' death, Israel did revolt; and the full might of Rome came in and sacked the city, burning the Temple of Jesus' day to the ground.

As Jesus and the crowds approached the gates, what the city of Jerusalem didn't know was that Jesus was not the kind of Messiah they thought he might be. The power he had come to overthrow was not political. He was not there to lead a revolt against Rome. Neither was it religious. He wasn't there to oust Caiaphas as the High Priest or to create a new religion. Jesus was coming to put the capstone on the Torah's teaching about power and authority that had begun in Genesis 1:26.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

That verse, about Day 6 of Creation, introduced a question that would be explored and defined by God's work throughout all the books of the Bible up to this moment: What does it mean to be made in God's image and to have dominion over Creation? God began literally at the very beginning, to define the use of human power and authority as something that is supposed to reflect the image of God. There is perhaps nothing else in the entire Bible that we have gotten quite as wrong, and we have the wars, atrocities, inequalities, and bigotries to prove it.

Just in the first few chapters of Genesis, our puffed-up understanding of being like God and being ruler of all we survey is knocked down quite a few notches. In Genesis 2, we learn that, whatever else dominion may or may not mean, it has limits. We can't even eat all the fruit! As it turns out,

neither can we rise up and kill someone out of jealousy. After murdering his brother, Cain asks God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The answer is...well, yes. Yes, you are.

And in that moment, we see how God does law enforcement. Cain is not killed with a lightning bolt or tormented forever in a dank prison cell. He is banished from his home, but God protects him and gives him a new start in another land. Moses had to flee after killing an Egyptian who was beating an enslaved Israelite and had to spend the next 40 years risking his life for sheep before he was fit to wield the power and authority God would give him to free his kin from Egypt and bring them to the Promised Land.

On and on it goes throughout the entire Bible—human beings using power and authority to claim supremacy over others who are viewed as resources for the powerful to consume and use at will. God responds with harsh consequences and prophets who shout, sometimes at the cost of their lives, that such a view makes a mockery of the image of God; that they have taken God’s name in vain and turned themselves into idols.

Jesus then comes as the prophet who would not just shout the words of the prophets of old but who would embody the image of God in a human life. Through both his teaching and his actions, Jesus shows us the answer to the question, “What does it mean to be made in the image of God and have dominion over creation?” As we meet him at the gates of Jerusalem, he has already taught the answer in many ways.

Jesus has told his disciples that the greatest people in God’s world have more of the characteristics of children than of kings; that in God’s realm the first shall be last and the last shall be first. He has reminded his followers that the entire Torah is properly summed up in loving God with all they have and their neighbors as themselves. He has given what must have been a very unpopular opinion that if a Roman soldier abused them by making them stop whatever they were doing and carry a pack for a mile, that they should double that and do two. Or if someone physically strikes them on one cheek they should just offer up the other one. Love even your enemies.

Jesus has also taught through his actions. He has stopped to care for the hated Samaritans and has healed the outcast lepers. He has given time and attention to the concerns of women and has refused to distinguish between rich and poor; sinner or saint when choosing who would join with him at a meal or benefit from his attention. And before the week is out, he—the adored and celebrated leader of this movement—would tie a towel around his waist and wash the feet of his disciples.

And now comes the climax of all of it—the moment when the people are still so caught up in human visions of power and authority that they expect him to overthrow the government, trembling at the violence they believe is coming, while also fully desiring the control they believe that violence will bring. And Jesus meets that moment by both confounding and enraging them by practicing what he has been preaching and what the prophets before him had always taught.

He will become the alpha by offering himself up as the omega. He will transform sin, not with brutality, but with grace. He will transform life, not by beating death to a pulp, banishing it from the world, or pretending it doesn’t exist. He will defeat death by willingly walking right in and through it. The Good Shepherd will lay down his life for the sheep.

What does it look like to be made in the image of God and to exercise dominion over all Creation? It doesn't look like Herod's palace, Pilate's office, or the priestly chambers of Caiaphas. It looks like the mangled, bloodied body of Jesus on the cross. When they saw it, the centurion and the other soldiers overseeing Jesus' death trembled as the earth shook. They saw in the crucified man the face of true power and ultimate authority. "Truly," they said, "this man was God's Son." Amen.