

Palm and Passion Sunday
 March 28, 2010
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The Palms: "Blessed is He Who Comes"
 Luke 19:28-40

The story of Palm Sunday is a story of contrasts. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna to the son of David!" (choir text). We might imagine the whole city of Jerusalem rejoicing. After all, we have acted out this pageant so many times with palm branches and triumphant music, —it must be true! But Jerusalem was a city of conflict. This couldn't have been an entirely popular parade. The Roman soldiers who occupied the city were all about, and even the Jewish Pharisees lining the parade route said to Jesus, "Order your disciples to stop." Some people, no doubt, were more ready to shout curses than blessings. Though the people treated Jesus as a king, "spreading their cloaks on the road," he rode not on a great horse or in a fancy chariot, but upon a lowly donkey, in order to fulfill the prophesy in the Hebrew bible, in Zechariah, where it says the king comes "riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (9:9-10).

What kind of king was this man? For Luke, the one who wrote this account in the bible, Jesus was the Jewish leader who came to fulfill the Law of Moses. He *was* Moses, and Joshua, and David all wrapped up into one, proclaimed as a Jewish king. He was to be the "anointed," which means "Messiah" in Hebrew and "Christ" in Greek. He was to be anointed as a Jewish king, like David.

And yet this man rode a donkey, not a horse, the symbol for war, but on a donkey, the symbol for peace. His very title "King of the Jews" would be used to mock him when he was later nailed on the cross.

In the Gospel of Matthew, and in the choir's anthem today, the crowds shouted "Hosanna to the Son of David!" (21:9). Hosanna means "Save us!" "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" If we read between the lines, we might say the crowds were saying, "Save us from the Romans! Save us from poverty! Save us from evil! You, who come in the name of our God, save us from all that is not godly! Lead us and be our king, like David. We want to honor you, O God, not Caesar!"

And then immediately next in Luke, after the procession through the streets, Jesus looked out upon the city of Jerusalem and wept. Though the people had shouted, "Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" what Jesus saw before him was anything but peace. He saw Romans persecuting Jews. He saw poverty—beggars on the streets. If Jesus stood looking out over Jerusalem today, I can imagine he would also weep. He would weep over the fighting between Palestinians and Israelis. He would weep over the wall built by Israelis to keep Palestinians out, the settlements being built on Palestinian land, and he would weep at the bombings by Palestinians that ignite the Israelis' anger. And then, in the next sentence in Luke, after looking over Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple and "drove out those who were selling things there," shouting, "My house shall be a house of prayer!" (Luke 19:41-46).

We have here contrasts: Blessing and curse! Ecstasy and agony. A royal entry midst a throng of poor people. Jesus preaching about peace and loving your enemies, yet violence

leading to a Jewish-Roman War that would later destroy the temple. A capital city set on a hill, but one that makes a person weep tears of sorrow. A house of prayer to honor the one God, Yahweh, turned into business as usual in a house for profit.

Bishop John Shelby Spong, an Episcopal priest and prolific author, has developed a strong case for how the Gospel Luke was written. He claims that Luke (if the author's name even was Luke) was likely a gentile Greek who became a Jewish proselyte and a follower of Jesus. He wrote this story of Jesus' life to be read in sections that correspond to the Jewish lectionary readings of the Torah, read—still today—throughout the year in the synagogue. He wrote this Gospel nearly 100 years after Jesus' birth—so Luke was not an eyewitness. He wrote the account by combining much of what he found already written earlier in Mark and Matthew, and he added parts of his own to illustrate the way Jesus came to fulfill the law. His writing is embellished with legendary accounts, to demonstrate not historical facts, but his own profound faith (*Liberating the Jews: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes*, 119-167).

This tradition of writing by embellishment was part of the Jewish tradition, called *midrash*. When you read the bible, you can't help but notice that stories repeat themselves, with different details. You can see similarities between Moses and Elijah and Jesus. You note the repetition of the number 12: 12 tribes of Judah and the 12 disciples. One story feeds the next with common symbols and common truths.

The big truth here in the Palm Sunday portion of Luke is the contrast between blessing and curse. In the early church, this passage, according to Bishop Spong, would have been read in the synagogue in the liturgical cycle, side by side with Deuteronomy, where it says, "See I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn from the way that I am commanding you today, to follow other gods" (11:26-28). This King of the Jews, riding on a donkey, represented a "way" of blessing, not the way of cursing, —the way of the God of Israel, the way of the commandments.—Later the first Christians were called those who "belonged to the Way" (Acts 9:2).

We belong to the Way when we choose a life of humility, a way of peace, and a practice of worshiping one God. We belong to the Way when we stand up to wrong, resist evil and oppression, and obey God's commandments. We belong to the Way when we follow the one anointed to be Messiah or Christ, not a political king, but the Prince of Peace.

The historical account of the entry into Jerusalem is not consistent in the four Gospels: Were there palms, or just any branches? Or were there only cloaks spread on the ground? Did the throngs shout "Hosanna," "Save us!?" Or were those words just borrowed from the Psalms? Was Jesus really riding on a donkey, or did Luke just write that to show that Jesus followed in the tradition of his faith? We do not know, for no eyewitness wrote this down.

The part that matters is the difference Jesus made. He was the one who came "in the name of the Lord." And it is in the name of the same Lord that we gather today. We come in the name of God, to worship and bless God, to wave palm fronds and say that we too affiliate ourselves with God above all other allegiance. "Save us, God!" "Save us from anything less than God!" Save us from a life without meaning! Save us from a life without love! "Hosanna! Blessed is He Who Comes in the name of the LORD!"

The Passion: "Betrayed with a Kiss"
 Luke 22:42-62, 23:33-56

Christians sometimes forget that Jesus was a Jew. According to the New Testament, he was circumcised at the temple and brought there as a youth, probably for *bar mitzvah*. He and his followers were likely celebrating Passover when they came together for their last meal.

CBS Evening News showed this week how the paintings of the Last Supper over the centuries have shown an increase in the quantity of food on the table. Craig Wansink, a religious studies professor, looked at 52 paintings of the Last Supper, which date from between the years 1000 and 2000, and studied them with the aid of a computer program that could scan the food items in the painting and rotate them in a way that allowed the loaves of bread, main dishes, and plates to be measured. To account for different proportions in paintings, the sizes of the food were compared to the sizes of the human heads in the paintings. The researchers' analysis showed that portion sizes of main courses (usually eel, lamb and pork) depicted in the paintings grew by 69 percent over time, the plate size grew by 66 percent and the bread size grew by 23 percent.
 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/24/arts/design/24arts-THE SUPERSIZE BRF.html>)

I wonder how much the disciples ate that night. You can't really take a painting of 1 to 2 thousand years later as objective history. That the food increased over the centuries in art may mean that people eat more today than in 1000, or at least artists want to depict more affluence in recent times. Or maybe the artists just wanted to make the event seem special with lavish food. But these paintings certainly don't prove how much food the disciples ate that night in the year, say 33 of the Common Era.

And you might wonder, how the disciples sat that night. Did they sit all in a row like in the famous painting of the Last Supper by Leonardo Da Vinci (from around 1498)? Is that how *you* sit at a dinner party, everybody on one side of the table? We don't know how the disciples sat; we really don't know anything factual about their gathering. All we know is how the writers of the Gospel accounts portrayed them.

And if you look for Judas in the paintings throughout the years, you'll find him easily; he is the one with the purse. Artists have consistently portrayed Judas as the keeper of the funds, the one about to betray Jesus for gold.

Luke says that at the festival of the Unleavened Bread, called Passover, the chief priests of the temple were looking for a way to put Jesus to death, and then "Satan entered into Judas" (22:1-3), and he went to confer with the priests and consented to betray Jesus for money.

The Gospel story of Judas' betrayal of Jesus with a kiss put a curse on the Jewish people that has lasted in the minds of Christians for centuries.

Let me help you understand this, for it is only in recent years that I have come to see how the writing of the Gospels themselves has contributed to anti-Jewish prejudice and outright anti-Semitism. Luke's account of Jesus' last days is a collection of stories that he heard by word of mouth, and read from the earlier Gospels, Mark and Matthew. Each Gospel tells the story a bit differently according to its author and its time of authorship. The Gospel of Luke was written probably close to the year 100, when Jews and Christians as groups were becoming more and more distinct. (At first, after Jesus' death, followers of Jesus were

Jewish; then later, gentiles became Christians, some first becoming Jews, then with Paul's teachings many gentiles became Christians without becoming Jews first and without circumcision. When the Roman-Jewish War (66-70 C.E.) ended with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, Jews scattered. They fought to survive, and those that did not accept Jesus as their Messiah, resented the Christ-followers. In some cases they threw the Christians out of their synagogues.

In response to this religious tension, Luke wrote his version of the Gospel story as a polemic against the Jews. Judas becomes the evil Jew who betrays Jesus. Judas is, after all, a name derived from "Judah," the father of the Jewish people, "Judea," the region of the Jews. We have the word "Jew" in English; even more similar to the name Judas is the word for Jew in German, "Jude," worn by Jews on a star-of-David badge as they were sent to concentration camps in World War II. This character, Judas,—for he was not likely a real person—was the archetype of evil. He betrayed Jesus for money. (One might wonder why the authorities even needed someone to help them recognize Jesus, he was so well known.) In Acts, the tale gets more embellished than in Luke, when Peter says what happened to Judas after Jesus' death: "This man bought a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling down headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out" (Acts 1:16). This is clearly an even more graphic account of Judas' death than in Matthew where Judas dies by hanging.

The Gospels are written in the tradition of *midrash*, the Jewish way of telling stories based on stories. The stories have truths for the people who told them. And they have truths for us today. In The United Methodist Church we believe we must grapple with our scripture, our tradition, our experience, and our sense of reason to understand God's work in history and in our contemporary lives. In the case of Jesus' death, this means to recognize that it was not the Jews who killed Jesus. It was the Romans who executed him by their means of execution: crucifixion.

Two weeks ago I met with Jewish leaders who want to be in dialogue with Christian leaders. One Jewish man told how when he was a boy, here in the United States, other boys in his class jumped him after school and threw stones at him and called him "Jesus killer." Through the years, riots have broken out on Good Friday around the world, Christians condemning Jews.

Finally, 2000 years later, scholars are setting the record straight: The Romans killed Jesus; it wasn't the Jews. After all, Jesus was a Jew. Finally, 2000 years later, after the bloody Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the pogroms, and the holocaust, scholars are setting the record straight: the Romans killed Jesus; it wasn't the Jews. After all, Jesus was a Jew.

The Romans arrested this King of the Jews—a popular teacher, a humble man—and they nailed him to a cross like a common criminal. His mother would have wept.