

“Raised Up!”
Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore

Matthew 21:1-11
San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ

Palm Sunday, April 5, 2009

For Suzanna

The song Suzanna sang this morning beautifully expresses our very human feelings of sometimes having weary souls or burdened hearts and our waiting upon God’s strength to raise us up. But I can’t help but listen to the words as though Jesus with a weary soul and burdened heart is waiting upon God’s strength. After all, it was Jesus who in the garden waited in solitude. It was Jesus who stood and taught and prayed on mountain tops. It was Jesus who walked on stormy seas. And it was Jesus who was raised up on the cross and made to be even more than before the very reflection of God’s love for the world. And I wonder, if the cross itself might be looked at as a metaphor of God’s shoulders holding up, raising up a dying Jesus.

The very first Holy Week began like today with shouts of “hosanna.” Jesus is surrounded with a crowd of peasant folk as he comes to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. But this is more than a parade of adoration. Jesus is staging a non-violent, dangerous, “in-your-face” protest demonstration. First, he protests the Roman imperial oppression of the Jewish people, and second, he protests those Jewish leaders who collaborated with Rome. (But before we pass judgement on the high priest, we must remember that Pilate had the power to hire and fire those priests. The high priests were also victims of Rome’s occupation.)

And yet the temple *had* become a place of oppression for many poor Jewish people who could not pay the taxes required by both the temple and Rome. The poor had been alienated by their own religious leaders because they were poor. Jesus resists the power of oppression anywhere he finds it! He is an equal-opportunity resistor of oppression. But in doing so Jesus is not trying to overthrow Judaism, but rather he is trying to be a faithful Jew honoring God’s words spoken through the prophets. He is a reformer not a revolutionary.

The drama of Palm Sunday is this: Sometime in the spring near the time of Passover in about 30 A.D., two processions entered the city of Jerusalem. One was the Roman imperial procession led by Pilate, riding in splendor, followed by a military show of force. Of course, Pilate didn’t want to be in Jerusalem; he preferred to rule from his seaside resort of Caesarea on the Sea; but whenever there was a Jewish holiday, especially Passover, when over 200,000 Jews entered the Holy City, Pilate had no choice but to parade his power and thus to say, “don’t even think about a Jewish uprising.”

The other procession is led by Jesus, humble and riding a colt. This procession is the opposite of imperial power; it is a protest of that power. Matthew says that he rode a donkey and colt with the implication that this was a nursing donkey with the little colt running along beside its mother. It’s an “in your face” statement that unlike Pilate’s grand parade, Jesus comes not on a horse, not even on a male donkey, not even on a female donkey, but on a nursing female donkey. This is a completely different kind of power. From the west rides Pilate, showing the force of the Roman empire; from the east comes Jesus. They are on a collision course that will unfold in the next week.

That first Holy Week, three forces met in Jerusalem: the Romans, the Temple high priest in cahoots with the Romans’ military machine, and Jesus, an itinerant, peasant preacher who dares to model himself after Israel’s kings. Like the processions of other Jewish kings (including

King David), Jesus rides down the Mount of Olives to the cheers of a crowd of peasants. Did he mean to do this? Did he mean this to look like a counter-political and religious demonstration?

If Jesus is acting like a king, then he's not like the kings the people are used to. Jesus is a king like the prophet Zechariah says: "will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations." He is a king of peace. (*The Last Week*, p.4)

The noted Catholic theologian John Dominic Crossan was asked on the *Today* show to describe who Jesus was in a concise one-liner. He said that Jesus was "a peasant with an attitude." Jesus came to Jerusalem as a faithful Jew to celebrate Passover. He came also as a faithful Jew to stage a protest. He came and showed salvific power, salvation, by not giving in to the powers of this world, by being faithful unto death. The truth of Jesus was that he placed his trust in God, and God raised him up!

Now during Holy Week we often hear anti-Semitic rhetoric (sometimes in movies that we assume are gospel truth.) We may hear that the Jews as a people were responsible for killing Jesus. I am not alone in protesting this kind of talk, and we must protest it, because throughout history the Jewish people have been persecuted and millions of them killed because of misguided theology about who killed Jesus. Hitler, after seeing the passion dramatized, proclaimed that this was why the Jews as a people were evil. To blame all the Jewish people for killing Jesus would be like blaming all white people for killing Martin Luther King, Jr. John Dominic Crossan, who has studied Jesus all his life, suggests that there was likely two *different* crowds.

One was the crowd of peasants who had come to Jerusalem and who heard in Jesus hope for their future. The other crowd came to Pilate wanting their hero, the "freedom fighter" Barabbas, released during the festival. It was likely a small group of privileged and powerful temple priests who arrested Jesus and pressed Pilate for Jesus' crucifixion. And it was likely a "crowd" of perhaps 6-12 people that pressed for the release of Barabbas. The word "crowd" is relative; 20 people would be a crowd in Gwen's Hillcrest apartment; but 20 people in this sanctuary would be sparse indeed. As followers of Christ we must be clear not to participate in or support the slander that the Jewish people as a whole are responsible for the death of Jesus.

Today let us remember that the Jesus who we follow is the image of the divine "raised up!" He was raised up on a donkey, not because he was too tired to walk that day, but he was raised up to show a kingship of nonviolence in opposition to the violence of Rome.

He was raised up by the accolades of the hosannas that day; and he was raised up on the cross, suspended as it were on God's shoulders, and as he was raised up, he became even more God's revelation of faithfulness to God's purposes for the world.

He became the faithful proclamation of God's resistance to the unjust powers of this world whether they be powers of political regimes or religious domination.

What if Jesus had refused his calling? What if he'd refused to be raised up? If he had been cowed or had retreated, than the powers of this world would have won. We would not live today with the hope that God's truth will not forever be pressed to the ground.

God raised up Jesus, and as those who learn and live by him, we too may have the courage to be raised up, held upon the shoulders of God, and be faithful to our call in our time and in our place. And so to this Jesus we add our hosannas: "blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"