



"IN THE WAKE OF TURMOIL – MATTHEW 21:10 (NRSV)

Liturgy of the Palms

By: Reverend Darien Jones

“Who is this?” they shouted, inquiring about the man entering Jerusalem. This man is the one for whom the multitude cried aloud again and again, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (v. 9). By now his fame and reputation preceded him. News of his ability to heal and perform miracles, as well as his gift to teach the masses, has traveled throughout the land. And yet, the city appears to have been left undisturbed by his presence until now. The moment at which Jesus of Nazareth rides triumphantly into the city is the same moment at which a city at rest becomes a city in turmoil.

During the Lenten season, our lectionary draws our attention to this passage of scripture. Across Christendom, we observe Palm Sunday as a time to commemorate Jesus’s arrival into Jerusalem. The text, however, draws us to something deeper about the relationship between Jesus’s triumphal entry and the state of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is the place where David reigned as king and where God gave Solomon direction to build a temple where God’s presence would remain. In Jerusalem, God assured Israel that David’s throne would be established forever. Jerusalem is the Holy City, the epicenter of the faith. It is the place where God’s people are expected to be free.

Now, however, Jerusalem is a shadow of its former self. After falling to the Assyrians, then to the Babylonians, followed by the Greeks, the city now stands in the aftermath of Roman occupation. Both the city walls and the temple where God’s presence dwelled had been destroyed and rebuilt. God’s people are subject to Roman imperialism; they are no longer able to govern themselves. One would think that with such rich history and tradition Jerusalem would not remain content under Roman control.

Yet, the Holy city appears to have been resting and undisturbed prior to Jesus's arrival. It is the entry of a local carpenter riding on a borrowed colt that shakes the great city.

As Jesus rides into Jerusalem, he fulfills the word of the prophet:

Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (v.5)

The great multitude surrounding him shouts "Hosanna!" which is interpreted, "Oh save!" What the prophet promises and what the people desire is a king, one with power and might whose reign brings salvation. Rather than looking up toward a great conqueror, they behold a lowly and humble carpenter riding on a borrowed colt. For a people anticipating a king who would reclaim Jerusalem, Jesus defies expectations. As Jesus mounts the donkey, his aim is to bring reconciliation and not desolation. This savior interrupts cycles of violence and shifts power away from what is mighty toward what is meek and lowly. Riding on a donkey evokes tranquility and harmony rather than war and destruction. And yet, with every intention of peace and victory for Jerusalem, the issue of turmoil still arises.

While the great multitude following him shouts his praises, those in the city are bewildered by Jesus's arrival. The two groups respond in polar fashion. The multitude stands in awe and hope, creates a pathway of palms, and shouts aloud *Hosanna!* But those within the city stand in chaos and confusion. Whereas the vibrant multitude crowns him Lord of Lords, the city moves from a state of rest to one of turmoil.

This is not the first time Jesus's arrival causes trouble. Matthew's text tells us that once before on a starry night wisemen came from the east toward Jerusalem looking for the newborn Jesus. Hearing of the birth of Jesus, King Herod and the whole city were "frightened" (Matthew 2:3, NRSV). King Herod was threatened by the possibility that Jesus would reclaim Jerusalem. There is a connection between Jesus's arrival and the subsequent turmoil or trouble the city experiences.

On multiple occasions, Jesus's arrival into the city of Jerusalem brings trouble and turmoil—once at his birth, and once at his triumphal entry. With both arrivals the assumption, and perhaps the hope, is that Jesus will overturn the present order of Jerusalem. Jesus's arrival not only exposes a corrupt and vile government for what it is; it also exposes the complacency of the holy city existing in a condition contrary to what God has promised. What God promised the children of Israel was a land flowing with milk and honey where they would be safe and where secure. But the people of Jerusalem are living as subjects of an ungodly system that undermines every promise of peace, justice, and prosperity. Jesus's triumphal entry into the city makes plain a fragmented system.

The turmoil Jesus's arrival causes is therefore necessary. The bittersweetness of turmoil is that there are some things in life that only turmoil can expose. There are certain truths about the corruptness within our daily living that only come to light in response to chaos. Jesus understands that a city at rest does not mean a city at peace. In fact, a city under occupation can never be peaceful in earnest. As such Jesus must ride into Jerusalem until the city shakes. Jesus may come in peace, but he will often *bring* turmoil.

Turmoil exposes our weaknesses, our gross misdoings, and our misunderstandings. In the world today, we find ourselves in the midst of turmoil. In the midst of COVID-19, the weakness of corrupt and failing systems has once again been exposed. The least among us cannot get access to the basic necessities of life or the essential preventative measures to ensure the possibility of avoiding the virus.

With shutdowns and quarantines across the globe, millions of poor and working-class people do not have the resources to maintain day to day living. The unfortunate reality is that while some will die because of the virus, others will die because they have no access to resources or money to afford resources. The rich and status holders have a certain security and safety, but the lives of the poor and those at the lower end of society seem to be expendable. The turmoil of COVID-19 did not *cause* the disparity in our healthcare system and economy. Neither has the outbreak caused a massive inequality in wages. Rather, it has exposed the evils that were already present and that existed long before this global pandemic.

Alas, we sit in the wake of turmoil. Many of us are lonely, confused, broke, sick, and out of options. We sit in the wake of turmoil that reveals to us daily that the lives we live in corrupt systems are against what God created them to be.

We should remain hopeful because the turmoil Jesus causes welcomes the power to save. What the multitude understood about the coming of Jesus is that in *his* coming there is power to overcome the evil in our lives. COVID-19 and the injustices that disrupt our lives may bring turmoil, but they cannot save or bring us salvation. Only Jesus's arrival and the turmoil that Christ alone brings, brings with it a savior.

Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven.

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