

Who Do We Choose?

Mark 11: 1-11

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.’” They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, “What are you doing, untying that colt?” They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, **“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”**

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

Mark 15: 6-15

Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder during the insurrection. So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. Then he answered them, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. Pilate spoke to them again, “Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?” They shouted back, **“Crucify him!”** Pilate asked them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, **“Crucify him!”** So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them, and after flogging Jesus he handed him over to be crucified.

If you’ve ever watched footage from the January 6th insurrection on the Capital Building it is disturbing to say the least. It’s too violent to show in church. Four years ago, people marched to the capital to protest the election results. They said it was stolen. Many there came waving their flags like palm branches. Instead of shouting, “Hosanna,” the crowd chanted “U.S.A.” or “Let’s Go Brandon.” In the center of the action dangled a noose, reserved for the one they considered a traitor. Some protesters walked around the capital building seven times, enacting the biblical scene in Joshua when the walls of Jericho fell down. Eventually, the gathering escalated—stirred up by some armed vigilantes—as the protest became a violent riot. Once inside the capital building’s chamber they started looking for evidence, but there is confusion about what they are supposed to be doing. Is this a takeover mission? Or a hostage situation? Or is this an information gathering mission? Some are snapping pictures of documents on their phones. Some are taking turns swinging back and forth in the vice president’s chair. It’s a chaotic zoo. Then the man known as the shaman leader does something interesting: he grabs his bullhorn, and he prays. He prays in the name of Jesus Christ. It’s shocking. So today, while the Palm Sunday procession is NOT the same as the Jan. 6 insurrection, I think it sheds some light on the events of Palm Sunday and the chaos that ensues during Holy Week. [

At the outset, imagine we are part of the Palm Sunday procession. Out in front are a group of people lying down cloaks—rolling out the red carpet for their chosen king. Then we see Jesus swaying back and forth as the donkey skeeters down the path. People are chanting, “Hosanna” and waving palms with exuberance. Now imagine: as part of the crowd what are we feeling? Maybe we are buzzing with expectancy. Maybe full of hope. Maybe we anticipate there’s a change-a-comin. Now wonder: what are we expecting Jesus to do? The text gives us a clue. There’s the prophecy from Zechariah. Where the Lord will perform a triumphant *and victorious* entry into the capital on a humble donkey—not a warhorse. But read a bit further and listen to what comes next: “the Lord will appear over them, his arrow will go forth like lightening.” Yes, the promise is that the Lord will bring peace, but how is peace achieved? If we are part of the crowd we sense that the moment of our long-awaited victory has arrived so we shout, “Hosanna!” which literally means, “God, save us...*now!*” We expect Jesus to overthrow the powers that be now. We expect the good guys are finally going to win today. We believe Jesus is the Chosen One to lead us into a new era. Now we might not be storming the capital with weapons, but are we not full of expectations of what is to come and how it is going to unfold?

Except, what happens instead? As the week progresses Jesus not only challenges political authority, but mainly he rattles the feathers of established religion. So notice what the chief priests do. They are crafty. *They use the political apparatus to enforce their agenda.* Good thing that doesn’t happen anymore—I wish! The conflation of religion and state to form religious nationalism is not new. As we speak, we are watching Christian nationalism on the rise in alarming ways. This week, a key architect in one presidential candidate’s campaign, when speaking of extremist border control policies, evoked the Old Testament when he said we should welcome migrants only “so long as they accepted Israel’s God, laws, and understanding of history.” Christian nationalism has infiltrated our legislative branches and been appointed to our highest courts. Candidates are using overtly religious, Christian language to get *elected to all in order to control our political agendas.*

Notice: the chief priests are in rivalry with Jesus over his radical understanding of who and what and how God is. Jesus hangs out with those society rejects. His theology is too open. His love is too wide. He’s blurred the line between what is sacred and what’s profane. So the chief priests know that *they* cannot commit murder—their position says that they have to remain innocent. So, they hand Jesus over to the political machine. But please notice: at the center of the manipulative violence is religion. Legislation to deny trans kids the right to exist. Legislation denying women’s rights to choose. Legislation punishing invitro pregnancies. What is at the heart of these decisions? A religious group who enforces their ideology through the political machine. It isn’t new. [Does anyone else need to see kittens right about now?]

But here’s where things get more interesting in the story. There is a trial. The political leader, Pontus Pilate, sees through their scheme. So he creates a loophole. It’s a tradition where the crowd gets to vote on which prisoner they would like to pardon. On the right we have Jesus, “King of the Jews” who started off quite promising in the polls but has fizzled out by not living up to the expectations. Then on the left we have a nationalist named Barabbas who is in prison for what? *Violence during an insurrection!* Some manuscripts of the story name Barabbas “Jesus Barabbas” as to make it perfectly clear that we have two versions of Jesus to choose from. We

have the religious nationalist who is imprisoned for trying to take the country back through violence. And then there's the other guy, the "King of Jews." Most of the people there are more than likely confused—they have no idea who this Jesus fella is. So the chief priests stir up the crowd to vote for Barabbas—after all, in the eyes of the majority, they are trustworthy religious people—and they manipulate the masses to implement their desire.

Now Pilate is stuck: he knows Jesus is innocent. But like most politicians, he wants to keep his pension and perks, so he allows the crucifixion to take place.

So the question of the day...the year...maybe the question of our lives: Who do we choose? Do we choose a way of love even when it looks like we lose? Or do we choose what the world so often chooses: the way of force, the way of violence. Who do we follow? Do we follow a leader who says, "Pray for your enemies because we are coming to get them," or one who says, "Pray for your enemies and learn to love them as well?" Do we follow a leader who works at bringing us together to see our common humanity, or one who insists on dividing us for political gain? And while it might seem like an obvious choice, it isn't as simple as it sounds. I mean, how does choosing peace work in a world that insists on violence? If you need an example, just ask the disciples.

Truthfully, I don't like to get political—contrary to what you all might think! But the gospel here is very clear: on the left we have someone who believes force is the only way to take our nation back from the enemy; and on the right is someone whose love is so wide that there is room for loving the enemy.

After the crowd chooses, we know Jesus hangs; and as he does, he becomes the scapegoat to end all scapegoats by exposing what mechanisms we keep choosing again and again and again.

So in a time when tensions are high, and fear is swelling, and violence seems like it is the only way, who do we choose? How we answer determines our future, not only as a nation, but also as a church.