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Parade or Protest?

Luke 19:28-40

We live in an age when truth is determined by where we get our news. And, we can even seek out “news” that supports our hopes, dreams and fears and filters out any facts or events that might confuse us or cloud our clear convictions. Truth it appears is relative. Even when “news outlets” can agree on the essential facts or timeline of what actually happened, then they disagree about what those facts or events mean.

While I sometimes despair over the parallel truth universes that seem to coexist uneasily in our country and even in this congregation, I know that this is not a new phenomenon.

In fact, the very story of the events we remember in worship today is a great case in point. The story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem accompanied by a crowd that was shouting and celebrating, and watched carefully by Jewish religious leaders is told by Matthew, Mark, John and – of course – Luke in the version we read today. John says that the crowd laid down palm branches in the streets. Matthew and Mark tell us that people laid cloaks and leafy branches on the road. Luke says people spread their cloaks on the road as Jesus entered. So, if all we had was Luke’s version, we could call today “Cloak Sunday.” But, all of those stories agree on the basics of what happened that day some 2,000 years ago. And I noticed this week that the heading in my Bible (headings that were added at some point by translators and interpreters – not present in the Greek Manuscripts) all call this event, “Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem.”

But, as I thought about what is happening today and about the events of Holy Week which we will remember, re-enact and reflect upon in the next seven days, I realized that if we were reading the news from the perspective of the Jewish religious leaders the title would not be “Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem.” The title might be “Dangerous Rogue Rabbi disturbs the peace!” or “Before vandalizing the Temple, a little known, self-proclaimed king organizes as parade to claim power and threaten to bring down Roman oppression.” Or, “Chief Priest says Jesus is a fraud.” So, the question might be for us, “was Jesus entry into Jerusalem a parade or a protest?”

Because Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on April 4th 1968 (50 years ago), I was thinking about how the news outlets reported on his “parade” from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in March of 1965. When the participants in that parade reached the crest of the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 7th, and looked into the eyes of the waiting state troopers and

local law officers under the direction of Sheriff Jim Clark and Major John Cloud, how the two sides defined the truth of that encounter could not have been more different. "Bloody Sunday" is for our nation a moment that reminds us that how one defines truth can be a life or death choice. Was that human movement of people across the Edmund Pettus Bridge a parade or a protest?

Maybe it was both.

In Luke's telling of the events, he says that when Jesus' gathering started down from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem, that the crowds were praising God joyfully and loudly, and saying, "Blessed in the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" And the Pharisees in the crowd (one wonders if they were participating or spying) said to Jesus, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." And Jesus answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

The belief in a God who is Truth, Life and Ultimate Ruler of the Universe means that we believe that no matter how confusing things may be, and no matter how much the partisan pundits may proclaim truth from opposite sides of the political divide, we believe that truth will prevail. God alone is eternal, and though we die in the struggle, truth will prevail over lies, deceit and confusion.

When the Civil Rights parade reached the steps of the Statehouse in Montgomery, Alabama on March 25, 1965, Dr. King ended his speech by answering a rhetorical question.

I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?" Somebody's asking, "How long will prejudice blind the visions of men, darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne?" How long will justice be crucified, and truth bear it?"

I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because "truth crushed to earth will rise again."

How long? Not long, because "no lie can live forever."

How long? Not long, because "you shall reap what you sow."

..... How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.ⁱ

While people of good conscience can look back on that time in our history and know that in fact, in that instance, truth did triumph, and prejudice and injustice suffered a loss, we also now know that fake news, hatred, injustice and prejudice did not die. They seem to be making a comeback. But I can tell you that it is not a resurrection! The only way hatred, injustice and prejudice can live now is in the bodies of those who have already died to the truth. When hatred, injustice and prejudice are walking around, it is more of a zombie apocalypse than a resurrection.

But the challenge remains. How can we tell a parade from a protest? A Resurrection from a Zombie Apocalypse? How can we tell truth from lies? How do we know which cause to champion and which to decry?

This is not an easy thing. And Christians don't agree even though we all profess to serve the same King and walk in the same parade. I think that there are two points we must remember.

First, in the Disciple 1 Bible Study I have been leading all year, we recently read Hebrews, and I was reminded this week of two verses from Hebrews 4:12-13: *Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before [God] no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.*

If we want to discern truth from fiction we must Study Scripture! I beg of you, read it for yourself. Study Scripture and in time Scripture will study us! There is no other way to see ourselves as God sees us.

And second, the real spiritual practice that will lead us to be able to know, recognize and to speak truth is to live after the example of Christ, to adopt the same attitude as our Lord, or as the Apostle Paul wrote:

Philippians 2:5-11

But listen carefully, human nature always wants to apply Christ's example to others. If only THEY would humble themselves. If only THEY would become obedient. Men tell women, be obedient. Whites tell blacks, humble yourselves. The rich tell the poor, be quiet. Anglos tell Hispanics, take the form of a slave. Those who control the wealth, say to those in need, be content. Those who have the information say to those who want the information, send a request to our lawyer. Those who have the power use that power to force humility on those who would disagree. That is not Christ-like nature. That, friends, is human nature. That is evil nature.

Friends, the Christian Church in our country has for far too long called on everyone else to be humble, obedient and willing to suffer without recognizing that until WE are humbled and obedient in love to the point of death, WE will not reflect the mind of Christ, and WE will not be able to tell truth from lie, justice from injustice.

The faith that we profess is not a list of intellectual affirmations that we must believe. The faith that saves us is not a checklist of how we have been morally perfect or at least been able to pretend or look the part. The faith that Christ modeled, and the faith that saves us is either walked, lived and practiced obedience to love, or it is dead and useless. The faith that Christ modeled either begins with our willingness to be humble, obedient and suffering in the service of love, or it is only a sanctified pretender to truth – a lie in gospel clothes.

The Palm Sunday Parade – the Palm Sunday Protest – is not just an event that happened 2,000 years ago. The Palm Sunday Parade and Protest is happening right now. Our call, our challenge, our choice is whether we will join in – knowing how the story ends and still choosing to join our Lord – or whether we will tell the parade goers/the protestors to “hush” , stop saying those things!, or to humble themselves.

I know what you may be thinking – because I think it myself. There are plenty of protestors who serve only hatred, bigotry and violence. I don’t want to be part of that parade. I hear you. I agree. Not every protest serves truth. But, remember Jesus’ parade was not careful, sanitized or painless. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, he went straight to the Temple and “began to drive out those who were selling things there; and he said, ‘It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer’; but you have made it a den of robbers.” (Luke 19:45-46). There is no sanitized, free, safe or easy way to follow Jesus.

It is either truth or death. Parade and Protest – if we are silent, God will cause the very stones to shout truth. Unless we humble ourselves in love, unless we are willing to suffer out of our obedience to love – NOT DEMAND THAT SOMEONE ELSE SUFFER – unless we are willing to follow Jesus in the parade and protest – God will shout the truth through someone else.

ⁱ “Address at the Conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; March 25, 1965. www.kinginstitute.stanford.edu