

Palm Sunday
April 9, 2017
Episcopal Church of the Holy Cross
Jaime Leonard

"It's a Tough Town"

A long, time ago - in the 1980's, I had the privilege of working on Capitol Hill. The work was always urgent, and there was a shared anticipation among fellow staffers about engaging the issues. My commute to work involved parking in the Rayburn Building and walking underground to the Longworth Building and taking an eternally slow elevator to the seventh floor. One Monday morning I entered an already packed elevator meeting the eyes of a few folks who were clearly a bit ticked off that I squeezed myself onto the elevator. I turned around as the doors began to close. Clearly audible were the footsteps, in high heels, of a woman running to catch the elevator. I could almost feel everyone mentally willing the doors to close so that we could all get to work. The footsteps grew more rapid and just as the doors were almost closed, I saw a woman's fist slam against the bumpers of the doors causing them to re-open. With no other choice, people shifted around and the woman fit onto the elevator. After the doors finally closed, a man's voice from the back of the elevator said, "It's a tough town."

The Jerusalem that Jesus enters is also a tough town. It was a town historically tough on prophets. It was, and still is, a town with competing political and religious interests. At the time Jesus enters, it was a town under the rule of a foreign power. Subjected to foreign occupation, there was a continual threat of uprisings and challenges to the Romans from the many political factions in the region. With that in mind, let's consider Jesus' entry into this political and religious city.

From the gospel reading: "As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away." This sounds pre-planned, pre-organized, doesn't it? Not a chance occurrence. So, it was to be a demonstration complete with dramatic effects, the details of Jesus' entry were planned. It was orchestrated to fulfill a prophecy in Zechariah 9 - which we just read: "See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." John Dominic Crossan, an Irish-American theologian, former Catholic priest, and an expert on the historical Jesus, suggests that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was orchestrated as a contrast to the formal, authoritative, entry which rulers, like Pilate, made into cities which they occupied. Crossan goes so far as to say that Jesus' entry was a mockery of the power demonstrated by ruler's entry. The contrast of a ruler entering a city on a war horse, decorated with weapons versus a peace loving, simply robed man entering on a donkey not only fulfilled a prophecy it made a point to the gathered crowds. Jesus's crowd, waved the palms and threw down their cloaks just as the imperial loyalists did, but they were certainly not the elite of society. They were people who had staked everything on the promises Jesus had made and who hoped his entry into Jerusalem would liberate everyone oppressed by the Romans. Bishop Michael Curry, in his Easter address to us all, suggests that Jesus' entry into the city was at the same time and at opposite gates of the city from Pilate's entry. Two leaders, with opposite views on how people should be governed, were entering a city bustling with people. Students, slaves, Pharisees, business owners, bankers, soldiers, butchers, blacksmiths, and sign makers. All of them challenged by how to live under the pressures of an occupying army. The occupying army was tense with anticipation of demonstrations and revolts. Barabbas, whose release is called for instead of Jesus', is thought to have been a prisoner because he was a violent revolutionary against the imperial government.

Additionally, the town was on edge, because of the upcoming holiday. The situation was combustible.

So, the stage is set. By my count from the reading, there are three general crowds and inevitable factions within those crowds. There's a crowd of people following Jesus, hoping that he will change the governing power structure and free them from bondage. By our measure today, they are clearly the underdogs. Nevertheless, they hope in, and march with, the man they believe is their savior. They are the healed and the bandaged, the uneducated and maybe there was even a shepherd to two who saw angels in the sky over thirty years before. Then there's the crowd that follows Pilate. They are Romans certainly; foreign service officers and soldiers. But, they are also those who make their living complying with the Romans. They are people who are aligned with Rome politically and economically and they are those who believe and comply with the system of domination. The third crowd is the crowd in the city, unaware of who Jesus is. They are people trying to survive under Roman rule. They are caught between the desire to be free, and just wanting to live their lives without controversy. Some just want to keep their heads down and work and be left alone. Others want to preserve the power they have within the current society. There are centurions, and slave girls and bystanders. There is hope and curiosity and nervousness and tension in the town. And hanging in the air is the omnipresent smell of the human struggle for justice and power.

It's a tough town.

Today we begin Holy Week. The services which are conducted on Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday this week immerse us in the intrigue and tragedy of Jerusalem. I encourage you to participate in the services, whether here, at Holy Cross, or at a church near where you work. By doing so, the experience of the resurrection is all the more astonishing. It's not fun, but it is deeply enriching. In just a few minutes, we'll read the passion. We witness, indeed, what a tough town Jerusalem was. We know this week is filled with betrayal, humiliation and pain. We see history, and we see ourselves. By Good Friday, as Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber tells us, "from his vantage point of the rough hewn cross, Christ the King, judges all of us." And for all of us, in every tough town that exists on the earth, he bestows upon us his generous forgiveness, for every mundane and heinous act we have committed. "Forgive them Father" is his judgement. And the gift of the resurrection is still to come.