

If I were going to direct a movie about Jesus' last week on earth. It would begin with a sweeping view of the city of Jerusalem – the sacred center of the Jewish world.

The camera would focus in on the Temple – God's dwelling place and would then probably pan to a statue of King David – the beloved King of the Jews 1,000 years before Jesus walked the earth. King David's reign was prosperous, peaceful, and united. He represented the glory days for the 12 tribes of Israel.

But since then, Jerusalem had become the center of a domination system of political oppression and economic exploitation where the powerful and wealthy elites of the Roman Empire ruled and made money off the poor peasants who worked the land.

In this system people were told that the king ruled by divine right. And if the King was the son of God, it was God's will for the peasants to be poor and oppressed.

This clever dynamic used religion to justify the domination of the wealthy and powerful over the multitudes of poor peasants.

It is the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year.

The camera then pans to the West gate of Jerusalem.

From the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea and Samaria is entering Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers.

This intentional show of force let everyone know that Roman power dominated them – politically, economically, and theologically.

You see, the emperor was the ruler of all because he was looked upon as the "Son of God" – beginning with the emperor Augustus and then moving on to his successors.

It was standard practice of the Roman governors in the region to be in Jerusalem for the major Jewish festivals in case there was any trouble – especially at Passover – a festival that celebrates the Jewish people's liberation from an earlier empire in Egypt.

The mission of the troops with Pilate was to reinforce the Roman garrison that overlooked the Jewish temple and its courts just in case any riots broke out.

So, you can just image the show of power with Pilate's entrance into the city – cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, armor, helmets, weapons, banners. The sounds of marching feet – the whirling of dust, the rumble of the earth, the beating of drums.

Pilate declared, “We are watching you and we will crush you if you so much as look at us the wrong way.”

Now the camera would move across the city to the other side picking up a movement at the East gate.

The camera would then focus in on a small procession of a poor dirty peasant riding a baby donkey cheered by other peasants.

This is not an entertaining flash mob event, but rather a planned political demonstration full of symbols that everyone in Jerusalem would immediately understand.

The time of the glory of Jerusalem was remembered, and the oppressed Jewish people longed for a new king David to deliver and save them and make Jerusalem great again.

The meaning of this man riding in on a colt is clear. The people knew that according to the prophet Zachariah, a king would be coming to Jerusalem “humble, and riding on a colt.” This king was supposed to banish war from the land – no more chariots, war horses or weapons, no more intimidation, bullying or show of force to illicit fear. He was to be a king of peace.

So, the peasant crowds surround him and spread their cloaks on the ground before him and strew leafy branches on the road to greet him as a king and cry out “Hosanna” which was a cry of praise, but also literally means “save us now!”

Can you hear the desperation and hope in their voices? Please – save us now. Are you the one we’ve been waiting for? Hosanna – Hosanna in the highest!

Jesus brought no army to liberate Jerusalem. He brought no scroll proclaiming the end of Roman rule. His procession was pathetic really when you compare it to what was happening on the other end of the city. A lost cause in anyone’s eyes.

Pilate’s procession embodied the kingdom of Caesar — power, glory and violence used to dominate people.

Jesus’ procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God, humble, and compassionate – a way of love and peace to set people free. The last will be first...

Two processions entering the city of God on that day.

At this point in the movie – we can only imagine the building tension and magnitude of the upcoming confrontation.

On Palm Sunday in this opening scene all the characters have been introduced.

- The wishful thinking of the crowds for Jesus to restore Jerusalem to its glory days.
- The Roman military “keeping the peace.”
- The Jewish leaders who had to comply with the Romans in order to protect their people from total annihilation.
- The disciples who are beginning to learn the real meaning of Jesus’ life and ministry.
- A faithful homeless rabbi with a big heart for the misfits and the powerless.

Holy week is the story of this confrontation. It is a story about the power of evil to destroy and the power of love to restore. And frankly at this point in the story – the odds are not in Jesus’ favor. And yet.... Here he is.

At this point Jesus doesn’t know the particulars of the outcome of this week, but he feels it in his bones. He knows this will be the beginning of the end of his life on earth. He knows even his friends don’t fully understand his way of love.

And he also knows that he is not alone. He says in John’s gospel, “I am not alone because God is with me.” And because God was with him, he was able to be there – fully present to the unfolding drama of that week. Realizing that he was born for a time such as this. That not even the gates of hell could have the power to overcome Love.

I think about my heroes of the faith like MLK Jr. who confronted systems of oppression. After being jailed several times, his house was bombed. This rattled him as he feared for his family.

He writes that he awoke several times in the middle of the night deeply troubled, knowing that if he continued to pursue his ministry and the fight for equality that he could be killed, and his family could be killed.

He writes that he made himself a pot of coffee, sat down at the table and with a pounding heart and shaking hands he begins to pray, “Lord, do you want me to continue? Lord, but I am afraid. How can I go on? Please help me,”

And then he said that all of a sudden, a sense of peace enveloped him, and he knew that all would be well no matter what happened to him or his family. “I am not alone because God is with me.” Did this take away his fear? No – but it did help him to be faithful to God’s call on his life.

I can think of other modern day saints Mahatma Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Teresa. They too, walked on against the odds, in awe of serving each moment in peace. Not letting fear have its way in their lives.

Bonhoeffer was stripped naked as he went before the firing squad in the last days of the Nazi regime in Germany for living out his Christian convictions. The Gestapo told him, “This

is the end.” And Bonhoeffer said, “No, this is only the beginning. I am not alone God is with me.”

The confrontation between the kingdom of domination and fear and the kingdom of love and peace continues today.

We see corrupted examples of power in our world today: governments, militaries, corporations, Political, corporate, and religious leaders.

And it is so easy for us to throw our hands up in the air in a helpless gesture. What can we do to right the wrongs – to bring healing to our communities and our planet. Whatever that might be it seems insignificant when facing the powers of greed, lies and polarization.

Because right now – it looks like the homeless Rabbi on the donkey is not going to win. But the story is far from over – it is only just beginning.

The question for us on this Palm Sunday is,” Which procession do we want to be in?”

And if we choose the poor rabbi on the donkey proclaiming peace then we have no choice but to trust.

This is an active choice – to trust against the odds over and over again, every day of our lives. In whatever we encounter in our lives – moral choices, potential suffering, and misunderstanding.

That regardless of the fear of taking a stand against the forces of oppression, we know deep in our bones that we are not alone. That Love holds us, empowers us, invites us in some very unexpected ways.

Amen.

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