

Sermon Title: A Seismic Arrival
Scripture: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

We are told in Mathew's Gospel that when Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem mounted on a donkey, and a colt, presumably her offspring, (which we celebrate in the event we call Palm Sunday), all the city was in "turmoil," all the city was "stirred[up.]" The Greek word is "εσεισθη" (e-seisthe) from which comes our word "Seismic". In other words, this was considered some type of earthquake-like event, the shaking of the foundations of the city. Luke gives us a small hint in his account of this event: "if my disciples are silenced, the very stones themselves will shout!" (Lk 19:40) An event that renews images of Habakkuk's dire predictions, that when cities are built upon iniquity and violence, "the very stones of the houses will cry out from the walls, and the plasters will respond from the woodwork."

Of course, we remember that the days and hours after crucifixion were seismic as well! The veil in the Temple was torn in two pieces from top to bottom, the surrounding tombs were split open by an earthquake-or-lightning-like event. The words of Ezekiel, speaking for the Lord in the Valley of Dry Bones, engender both our hopes and our fears: "when I [the Lord] open your graves, when I bring you up from the grave, ... I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live!" (Ez. 37:13-14). With the shaking of our foundations, we know in our bones that something is about to happen, something we cannot fully explain. Something "seismic!" We sense closely: that the dead inside the tombs will all be raised in the shadow of a moment. Can it be? And if we were to see it with our own eyes, as of Lazarus, we might say, "Unbind him!" "Release her! "Let them go!" Death cannot hold them! Jesus being the first born from the dead, the first fruits of those who sleep! Where Jesus rides, the graves open! Where Jesus walks, Death retreats! With Hosea, we might declare: "O Death, O Grave, where are your plagues? Where is your victory, where your sting? (Hosea 13:14; 1 Cor 15:44)

This event we call Palm Sunday harkens back to a story from the First Testament, with David and Solomon as the primary characters in the story. As part of the ceremony to crown Solomon as King of Israel and Judah, Solomon entered the gates of Jerusalem on a mule. His father, David, arranged the ceremony with the priest Zadok, and with Nathan the prophet, that Solomon should ride on his father's mule into Jerusalem and, on the way, stop beside the Gihon Spring near the Temple Mount where Zadok would anoint him with the horn of oil from the sacred tent of meeting. The trumpet would sound out the sacred anointing and the people would shout "Long Live King Solomon." The people would then form a parade to walk toward the palace following the new King, "playing on pipes and rejoicing with great joy," to escort Solomon to his throne room, where he might be seated as the new King. This was a grand parade, like no other ever known to humankind, the biblical writer declares that, during this parade, the "earth was split by their noise," that the "earth quaked at their noise." (1 Kings 1:32-40)

An interesting observation is that Jesus descended into Jerusalem by the same road that David ascended while fleeing the army of his son Absalom. David walked barefoot out of Jerusalem, along this road up the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley, with his head covered in shame and weeping with those who followed him (II Sam 15:30). When David reached the summit, Ziba would provide him a donkey for his journey into the wilderness to escape being killed by his son Absalom (II Samuel 16:1-2). So, in this sense, Jesus is returning as a Son of

David, with a parade to usher in God's Rule, God's Reign, as Jesus says, "A kin[g]dom not of this world!" Jesus would descend down the same path, riding on a donkey to the shouts of Hosannas, with people rejoicing to crown a new king, like Solomon, if God would but greet their Messiah with success!

The prophet Zechariah had boldly declared the coming of the Messiah: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud! Your King comes to you, victorious and triumphant, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. The battle bow should be cut off and he shall command peace to the nations, his dominion will be from sea to sea, and his reign to the ends of the earth. (Zechariah 9:9-10)

No doubt the people who lined the path down from the Mount of Olives knew the song of this prophet and knew it well, quoting also Psalm 118:26 "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." Today, we have relived this experience with our children, lining the path surrounding the Lord's Table, singing "Hosanna to the Son of David! Hosanna in the highest heaven." (Matt 21:9; Mark 11:9; John 12:13) Only Luke adds the words: "Peace in heaven; and glory in the highest heaven." (Luke 19:38). No doubt the Gospel writer is crying with the Savior over Jerusalem, "if only you knew *the things that make for peace.*" (Luke 19:42).

There is a somewhat famous image of Jesus rounding the top of the hill as he approaches Jerusalem, and seeing the city below from a distance, he begins weeping and says: "If you had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!" (Luke 19:41-42). This view from the Mount of Olives is a view that those who sought to conquer Jerusalem, would describe as spectacular. But, Jesus weeps at the sight of it. One of the manuscripts for Luke's Gospel adds the adjective "your" at the end of this quote: "If only you had recognized on this day the things that make for your peace." Adding this adjective changes the quote ever so slightly into a comment about spiritual, inner peace rather than just a physical peace among armies or an absence of conflict. Jesus, if this manuscript is correct, is pondering and weeping about the citizens of Jerusalem not being able to find inner peace.

"Seek peace, and pursue it, writes the Psalmist.(Ps. 34:14; 1 Pet. 3:11). Literally, seek peace and chase it down with vigor. Once you capture it, shake it for all you're worth! Hold it down and don't let it escape you. Oh, if it were only that easy! Some have opined that peace is only a pause between wars. Jesus is quoted as saying: "You will always hear of wars and rumors of war," (Mt. 24:6) "so do not be alarmed." I think Jesus would not be satisfied to hear us speak of such things as a "temporary peace." He would say that we need to study the science of peace and apply the principles of peace on a persistent basis, where peace is not an afterthought, but a forethought.

Paul echoes in his Letter to the Romans, the words of Jesus uttered as Jerusalem comes into view, above the city, sometimes called the "City of Shalom," or the "City of Peace." Paul writes: Let us then *pursue what makes for peace* and for mutual up-building," (Rm. 14:19). Do you suppose somehow he knew those famous words of our Lord? Perhaps the words had circulated across the land somehow. Perhaps the people overheard! We have come to chase down our peace! We have come to study peace, to study war no more, as Micah and Isaiah declare (Is. 2:4; Micah 4:3)

Remember the poem from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow entitled “a Psalm of Life”. “Life is real! Life is earnest! And the grave is not its goal; Dust thou art, to dust returnest, was not spoken of the soul...Let us, then, be up and doing, with a heart for any fate; still achieving, still pursuing, learn to labor and to wait.” So what does it mean to pursue our peace. What does it mean to chase it down and shake it vigorously? Is the shaking part necessary? Perhaps, it is. Perhaps this is the way we make the peace our own? This is the way we prove it is for real and not a fake peace.

George Fox writes: “The first step to peace is to stand still in the Light.” Standing still and centered would hardly seem to be an energetic shaking of the foundations. Why is it important to peel back the layers of peace like an onion? It is important because we must know if our peace is real. The test of Daylight is the great proving grounds for our sincerity. Will our peace hold up in the light of day?

The famous Scottish pastor, John Watson, penned: “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” John was acknowledging the inner workings of the spirit to challenge us sharply for our peace. By being open and sincere about our search for peace, we have a greater likelihood of achieving it. Peace is a unity of spirit produced by a humble mind and a tender heart, according to 1 Peter 3. It is also identified in the Gospel of Mark as “having salt in ourselves” (Mark 9:50). The salt gives flavor to what we do and say. We cannot be generically at peace. For peace to be real, it must be specific and personal, the result of a hard battle each day. Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” Rom 12:18

We sing “Hosanna!” during our Palm Sunday worship. It means something like: “Lord, Please Save us!” Lord, Please Grant us Success!” It is an appeal for deliverance. It has something of the spirit of Maranatha, which means “Come, Lord Jesus, Come,” only with the words: “Save Now, Lord Jesus, we Pray.” ‘annah <Adonai> hoshi ‘ah nna.’ Please save! It carries the spirit of joy in the word itself. The word is in the imperative or command mode. Hosanna! is a cheer! Hosanna is a praise! Hosanna in the Highest is a supreme adoration of God. It is declared at a shout, in a loud voice! During the Feast of Tabernacles, or Passover, the 7th day of the festival was called “Hosanna Day,” or the Great Hosanna!”

Who knows, but on that same day that Jesus rode the meandering donkey and its colt down the long ascent from the Mount of Olives, Pontius Pilate was being escorted into Jerusalem by the imperial Roman army. It was a parade like no other, to inject fear into the people lined up along the way; it was ‘shock and awe’ as the parade entered the Lion’s Gate into Fortress Antonia. It was a parade of palms for the Caesar’s representative symbolizing colonial triumph. Palms were a sign of victory; the Romans rewarded their athletic champions and their war heroes with palm branches and parades. Some have wondered WHERE the people celebrating Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem obtained their palm branches. It would not surprise me that maybe some of those branches were supplied by those authorities hoping that they would line the entryway to the Lion’s gate to hail Pilate as the Son of the Divine. Instead, the branches found their way to the entryway to the Golden Gate, the Savior’s Gate, on the other side of the Temple, the Gentile side of the Temple. They found their way to the parade for Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah of

God, who came to bring, not a sword, but a kiss of righteousness and peace. The Hebrew word for the date palm is “tamar,” associated with grace and elegance and beauty; it was the name given to King David’s beautiful daughter, Tamar. The palms have become a symbol of victory of the spirit over the flesh, a symbol of healing and wholeness beyond the violence. So, perhaps the people lining the parade route borrowed the emperor’s palm leaves to toss before Jesus that day, imported from who knows where to celebrate the emperor’s parade into Jerusalem, but now put into service for the true King, the Son of David, but also of God, to celebrate the coming of God’s reign. Only there would be no castle into which to enter, no Fortress Antonio in which to hoist the flag.

The parade for Jesus would cross the Kidron Valley, the trash heap of the ancient world, where the stones of temples built to house foreign gods were thrown after the destruction of those temples, Jesus would cross that symbolic valley of death in victory over death to teach in a place known as Solomon’s Porch, literally constructed out of local stones excavated from the Kidron Valley. But the people who met him there to hear the story of God’s love, to hear the story that God would soon reign over the hearts of men and women Gentile and Jew, alike, who were beyond the reach of this valley of death. They were in the parade of love that leads to life, abundantly made available in the arrival of Jesus.

This parade of love crossed the valley just prior to Passover to confront on the other side, a parade for death, led by Pontius Pilate and Herod the Great, both of whom would preside at his trial at the end of the week. This was a parade of love coming down the Mount of Olives. People spread their garments along the path of that parade, along with their covering blankets and cloaks worn over their shirts. Perhaps they were re-living the joy of those who spread myrtle twigs and robes along the path of Mordecai as he came forth victorious from the palace of Queen Esther. Only John mentions palm leaves, the other Gospel writers speak of “mattings,” twisted together out of straw, rushes, or leaves, mattings made out of branch cuttings from orchards or vineyards or olive gardens, a mass of twigs and straw beaten to form a bed or a carpet for walking. The people of God were making straight the highway of God, paved with joy of Hosanna!

In this season of Lent 2024, let us become peace-tellers in the parade of love! Alleluia! Amen.