



Game of Thrones: A Palm Sunday Sermon
Luke 19:28-40; Philippians 2:5-11

Sunday, April 14th, 2019 ~ Palm Sunday
First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois
The Rev. Dr. Forrest Krummel, Jr.

This is the last season of the HBO series *Game of Thrones*, a fantasy drama set in the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros. It follows the struggles for control of the realm's noble families. It has intrigue as the good and honest as well as the evil and foolish are murdered. Power and control are brutal mistresses. Power and control are also the name of the game of thrones.

Our Gospel is kind of a “*game of thrones*” as three powers vie for control. The convergence of these forces sets the stage for Holy Week. Their battle dates back to the very dawn of the first humans. Their story is as relevant as Today and as new as Tomorrow.

We make a tragic mistake if we think that Palm Sunday is merely about children waving of palm branches down a center aisle. In one sense, the drama of Palm Sunday is played out in our hearts and minds every day.

There was the might of imperial Rome symbolized by its golden eagle, Caesar, Herod, and Pilate. Rome ruled by strength and power, might, and force, intimidation and fear. Their battle cry was, “Hail, Caesar!”

Then there was the power of the Temple. Steeped in tradition and ruled by an almost incomprehensible number of rules that the faithful needed to follow, it lost its “soul”. They knew how to tithe mint and dill and cumin but had forgotten the “why”, the far weightier matters of “fairness, compassion, and commitment”. (Matthew 23:23)

And then there is the Kingdom of God, riding into Jerusalem on a carpet of cloaks thrown down thrown down before God's Anointed One. At Logos, our midweek children's program, last week my class asked why people threw their coats on the ground before Jesus. I told them that it was an impromptu “red carpet” that is rolled out for important people and events.

Jesus approached the edge of Jerusalem on the back of a colt, one that had never been ridden. His disciples, in Luke's gospel a large number, were so caught up in the fever of moment and the excitement of Passover that they made a ruckus shouting, “*Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest*”.

The enemies of Jesus, fearing a Roman backlash, told Jesus to quiet his disciples. He replied, though, that even if his disciples were silent the very stones would cry out. Something momentous was happening. It could not be stopped.

Victor Hugo once noted that there comes a time when a movement whose time has come cannot be stopped by armies nor anything else. That is essentially the message of Luke's text. In Jesus the Kingdom of God was breaking into this world, and it could not be denied. Like the smallest mustard seed, once sown it steadily and, persistently grows, like a weed. “*Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*” is more than a phrase in a rote prayer.

The *Pax Roma* or the Roman Peace was maintained by force and fear, but it was doomed to failure. “*Some trust in chariots,*” the Psalmist wrote, “*and some in horses, but we trust in the Lord.*” (20:7) Nations rise and fall, the only thing that is eternal is God’s Kingdom.

Fear eventually wears thin and force loses its power when one is no longer afraid to die. Through the weight of its own success and ensuing corruption which inevitably followed in success’s wake, Rome fell to the Barbarians, never to rise again except in memory.

The Temple, too, fell. In an act of brutal retribution Rome sacked Jerusalem and the Temple around 70 a.d. The Temple, though, spiritually fell long before then. Its rules and traditions became unbearably cumbersome. They became “fossilized”, no longer relevant. When my wife and I were in Notre Dame Cathedral several years ago I noticed that it had been largely transitioned into an event center. The congregation sat in what we would call the choir loft. I asked our docet if she attended church. She replied that she did not. It was largely now left to the grandparents. The faith, as practiced or pronounced, had become irrelevant.

The Kingdom of God, though, well, that is a different story. The Kingdom of God does not depend upon physical force or intimidation. It is “new every morning.” (Lamentations 3:22-23) It is powered by the force of Love. God’s love is transformative and renewable in every generation. It will always find expression, even in the most unexpected places. It cannot be stopped by external force or fossilized tradition. Like a stream, it will find a way to the eternal river of the water of life, bright as crystal and flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. (Revelation 22:1)

Jesus once said that the world will know his disciples...and him by transference...by the way that they love one another.

Last Friday in this sanctuary we celebrated a life and baptism of one of First Federated Church’s saints who completed this part of life. The last hymn, selected by the family, was “They Will Know That They Are Christians By Our Love.” One of the lines of that familiar hymn is:

“We’ll guard each one’s dignity, we’ll guard each one’s pride”.

That is one element of love, but love also doesn’t keep score of sins, nor rejoice when others fail. Only love can save the world from its brokenness.

I wonder if the writer of Philippians had this in mind when he wrote, *Think of yourself the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. Though he had equal status with God, he didn’t cling to the privileges of that status. When the time came he set aside the privileges bestowed upon him and took on the status of a slave--a human. ... He didn’t claim privilege. Instead, he lived a selfless life...unto death on a cross.*

Palm Sunday is just the salvo for the battle of the human heart. The Battle continues on Maundy Thursday. Its bleakest moment will be witnessed on Good Friday. And then, on Easter the final episode of God’s *Game of Thrones* will be revealed as will be our role in that great drama.

To God be the glory. Amen.