Matthew 21: 1-11

The Battle of the Parades

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The streets of the city were full. The very air felt dangerous. Men seethed with the pulse of anger. Women wept at night with rage and sorrow. Their rulers had let them down. People poured into the streets. They came by the hundreds, then the thousands. Whole families shouted slogans. They did not care how dangerous it was. Palm Sunday? No, actually Israel this week.

The city was a sea of blue flags emblazoned with the white stars of David. Crowds confronted the authorities. Riot police threw tear gas. People wanted a new regime. What began as a political demonstration evolved into a national uprising. We imagine that Palm Sunday was a summer festival or a Fourth of July parade, but those events are nothing like Palm Sunday. But it was a political demonstration, not a picnic with palms. It was street theatre. It was pointed. It was dangerous. Think Tiananmen Square or women removing their hijabs in Iran. Jesus was asking for trouble.

Do not be fooled by the humble colt. That was all part of the street drama. Jesus had planned this event to coincide with the day Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor arrived. When he tells his disciple to go get a certain colt it is like saying “Go to the parking lot next to Target; you’ll find a pristine Lexus with the keys inside. Take that car and bring it to me. If you are questioned, blow them off, because I need to make a point.” Palm Sunday was edgy, scary, and crazy. What is really going on and what does it have to do with us, in Appleton today? Let’s take a closer look.

In the first place, Jesus is offering us an alternative. He says, “You don’t have to go along with the Romans, or their worldview. You can do things differently.” In Jerusalem in those days people crowded into the city from all over the Middle East for a week-long festival to re-live the story of Moses when he freed the slaves in Egypt. They re-told the drama of how God heard their prayers when they were captives. God sent Moses, and then ten plagues. God showed them the way to freedom even with slave catchers chasing them. God parted the waters and downed their enemies. At Passover the people rehearsed all their past grievances. They nursed their history of their abuse. They re-lived centuries of oppression by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks and now the Romans. As their blood boiled they often into the streets at Passover in protest. Jerusalem was a tinder box as people wondered if God would do it again, or if they should turn their plowshares into swords and get things started.

The Roman governor hated Passover. He was nervous and on edge. He had to leave his lovely villa on the Mediterranean and travel with a legion of troops to the humid city. He knew the rebels had no chance of success, but he also knew Emperor Tiberius expected him to keep control. So, every year Pilate rode into the holy city, entering by the West Gate on the biggest nastiest looking stallion, in his stable, flanked by ferocious elite fighters on all sides. They arrived in solemn procession meant to terrify, Think a North Korean military demonstration. Pilate rubbed their oppression in their eyes. No one knew how to fight that until Jesus came up with his idea for Palm Sunday. Make fun of Pilate. Turn the day into a Saturday Night Live spoof. Show everyone how silly the Governor looked, and provide an alternative to his violent procession.

One year ago in Kharkiv, Ukraine after the city had been mercilessly bombarded by soviet bombs came a musician. There in front of the crumbling wall of what was left of an apartment building, Denys Khachevtsev placed a stool and sat down to play cello suite #5 in C minor. As the tune of Bach’s concerto went viral on social media the world saw another option, a human alternative to this madness, a choice. You can tremble before Russian barbarity or thrill to beauty. You can cower in terror or live with hope. You can succumb to Putin’s death-dealing ways or align with human decency. No matter how bad this war becomes they cannot stop the music. No matter how dangerous the streets we still have this melody of hope in our hearts and heads. The Ukranian cellist offered another way.

While Pilate arrived from the West, Jesus came from the East. Pilate sat proud in the saddle. Jesus slumped on his young beast. Pilate looked down on the people with disdain. Jesus wept in love. Pilate was scared of an uprising. Jesus was confident in God’s power, whatever came that day. Silently Christ’s body screamed his message for him. You have an alternative to bowing before treachery and violence. You can give your allegiance to the Son of God. You can follow the flashy tyrants or follow a humble teacher. Given this choice, why would anyone choose to choose Pilate over Jesus? That brings us to our second point.

Secondly, Jesus says, the choice is between fear and faith. People followed Pilate because they were afraid. He was a bully. He did not have to slaughter everyone, to subdue a crowd. He just made an example of one person. Romans controlled whole populations masterfully through public torture, crucifixion.

When the Romans got angry, they came through like the Russians in Ukraine, destroying everything in their path. Historians tell us that Jesus and his friends knew all about Roman treachery. There is historic documentation, according to John Dominic Crossen that Rome destroyed the port city 4 miles from Nazareth where Jesus grew up. It happened when he was a little boy. When the Romans destroyed a big city to curb rebels, they usually burned all the surrounding villages, to teach the people a lesson. Chances are that Nazareth was among them. That meant they destroyed the crops, set fire to the homes, raped the women and slaughtered the men. Even if Nazareth escaped this punishment, Jesus would have grown up hearing about all the other villages in Galilee that suffered such traumatic loss. We don’t know much about Christ’s childhood, but historians are clear that the Romans were persecuting northern Palestine right where Jesus lived.

Yet, child of that history, somehow Jesus became a remarkable prophet of peace. We can only surmise that he confronted his fears of the Romans early on. Seeing the limits of fear, he became a tower of faith. Like a phoenix that rises out of that brutal destruction, Christ is a man of extraordinary faith. He refuses to nurse anger, or fantasize about revenge. Having faced his own worst fears, Christ’s belief in God’s power is unshakable.

In his new poem, Benjamin Cremer writes:

We want the war horse, Jesus rides the donkey.

We want the eagle; the Holy Spirit descends as a dove.

We want to take up swords; Jesus takes up a cross.

We want the roaring lion; God comes as a slaughtered lamb.

We keep trying to arm God; God keeps trying to disarm us.

Whatever bullies you face, at work, in your neighborhood, or your family, remember Jesus says your faith is stronger than fear and it is the only thing tthat will get you through. Rely on your faith; don’t be guided by your fear.

Finally Jesus says, this story was never about Christ’s decisions. Jesus came to demonstrate how to make our own decisions. God sent Jesus so that we’d make better decisions. God sent Jesus so we’d see the world differently. He came so we’d stop supporting systems where rich people take money from the poor. He came so we’d have a bigger view of who are neighbors are. He came so we could expand our views about what love looks like. He came to change how we think about forgiveness. He came to inspire us to stop fearing strangers or refugees and start to see them all as new neighbors at our gates. He came to teach us to protect the children of this world – and keep them safe, from being hungry or poor or used.

In Nashville this week we had another school shooting. Three fourth graders and three teachers were gunned down in class. In 2022 there were 303 school shootings in the nation’s k-12 database. So far this year there were 89 gun related incidents at a school in our country, nearly one a day, killing 18 adults and children and injuring 56. There are plenty of lawmakers who think that these trends cannot be stopped though over 90% of Americans believe in background checks and other precautions. My friends I have no more thoughts and prayers. This is our problem. This is on us, now. We have to make American schools safer.

On Palm Sunday Jesus lays out life’s options. He asks his followers to decide.

The choices today are as stark and important as they were in Roman times – the path of fear or the path of faith, the path of violence or the path of peace. Do we want to follow Pontius Pilate or Jesus. We decide every day. We decide what books we read, how we vote, how we use our money, where we raise our voices. You and I decide. The path of peace or the path of violence? The path of faith or the path of fear?