

A KING'S RANSOM

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

March 25, 2018; Palm Sunday, Year B

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; John 12:12-16

***“So they took branches of palm trees
and went out to meet him, shouting,
‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name
of the Lord — the King of Israel!’”***

John 12:13

“Lionheart,” they called him.

They named him that because of his courage in battle — and truly, King Richard I of England *was* a fearsome warrior. He led an army to the Holy Land, to try to recapture Jerusalem from the Muslims. He very nearly succeeded.

But there were divisions in the ranks, and the Third Crusade fell apart. The French and the Germans didn't get along with the English. King Richard left for home — and it was then his adventure really began.

Passing through Germany, in disguise, his true identity was uncovered. The German Emperor Henry VI threw him into prison. Henry declared he would not let Richard go until the people of England had raised the staggering sum of 150,000 marks.

It was, literally, a king's ransom. When the king is in prison, the people pay the price.

All over England, money was collected, to buy King Richard out of prison. Finally, there was enough. The King went free — and ever after, his return home has been celebrated as the final scene of every Robin Hood movie ever made.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, he too was hailed as a king. And, like Richard the Lionheart, he too would soon be arrested.

Yet for Jesus, there was no ransom either asked for or offered. They hauled him before the chief priests and the scribes, and eventually before the Roman governor, Pilate.

Jesus did not cut a very kingly figure, there in Pilate's courtyard. They had stripped him, and beaten him. The only crown he wore was a crown of thorns.

Pilate, being a practical sort of politician, saw no advantage in treating Jesus as a visiting head of state: despite what the people had been calling him as he entered the city. Had there been anyone willing (or able) to raise a king's ransom for him, the governor might have taken a different approach. But this country rabbi, who'd had ridden into town on a donkey, had nothing. As far as Pilate was concerned, he was just a troublemaker, an insurrectionist. Pilate had learned to nip these Judean revolutionary movements in the bud. And so, he offered the mob that cruel choice: Jesus or the thief, Barabbas. They chose Barabbas; King Jesus went to the cross.

It had all looked so different, just a few days before. The sun was shining, the crowds were cheering, the people were running to catch a glimpse of him, calling out: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord — the King of Israel!"

What was on Jesus' mind that day, as he allowed the people to make such a fuss over him? He didn't contradict them, saying, "I am not the King you're looking for." No, he let the demonstration go on. He received the cries of adulation. He let the people lay their cloaks down in the road before him — a gesture of deference offered only to those of the highest rank. He let them go on waving palm branches: a politically provocative act, because palm branches had been the symbol of the Maccabean rebellion a century before. That revolt had actually succeeded for a brief time in throwing the foreign overlords out of Jerusalem.

But yet, clearly, this demonstration at the city gate was not an invasion of Roman-held territory. Jesus had no army following behind him. We wore no olive wreath of victory on his brow. He was not riding a mighty war-horse, nor steering a chariot — as you'd expect a conquering hero to do. He was perched atop a donkey, like some country bumpkin: his feet just about dragging along the ground. Donkeys don't always go in a straight line. Sometimes they stop altogether, dig in their heels and have to be prodded along. Very likely, there was laughter in the crowd, as they watched this Nazarene rabbi make his zigzag way down the street.

Jesus was making it very clear that he was not some high-and-mighty general. He was a man of the people. Everyone could see that. But he was also doing something else that day. Very likely, he was making fun of the powers-that-be. He was gently mocking them.

Jesus' triumphal entry has been called an exercise in revolutionary street theater — and it does seem to have been something very much like that. Everybody back then knew what a kingly parade was all about. The Romans specialized in that sort of thing. Pontius Pilate himself undoubtedly climbed into a chariot at regular intervals and showed off the power of his troops.

Everybody knew, as well, the victory parades the Romans liked to mount, after vanquishing their enemies. They were famous for their pageantry.

First of all, there were thousands of soldiers, marching rank on rank. You could hear them coming a long way off: the beat of the drums, the blare of the trumpets, the thunderous footfalls of the legions, marching row upon row. Each unit of men marched behind an imperial standard: a symbol perched high atop a pole. Often, that symbol was a brass or gilded Roman eagle, with the letters, "SPQR" – Latin initials, which stood for, "The Senate and the People of Rome."

Back towards the end of the procession, there were horses: huge war horses, snorting and stamping — wild-eyed beasts bred for the battlefield. They looked like they could break free of their reins and start trampling passersby, any minute. Riding atop one of those horses, or maybe standing in a chariot being pulled along by two or three of them, was a Roman general. He wore a breastplate, polished to such a sheen that it reflected the sun. His equally-shiny helmet was set aside for now, and his brow was crowned instead with an olive wreath, the symbol of triumph.

If this were a victory parade — and the soldiers were battle-hardened troops returning from a campaign — then there were some other people in the parade, as well: prisoners of war. These miserable wretches had their hands tied behind their backs, as mean-looking soldiers prodded them onward at spear-point. These pathetic specimens were unkempt, dressed in rags. They had a wild look in their eyes, a hunted-animal look. They knew they were not long for this world: for, moments after the parade was ended, their purpose for living would be ended, too. Then, it would be a sword slashed across their throats, or a rope twisted tight about their necks, or maybe a swift, hard blow to the back of the head — and after that, oblivion.

The Romans knew their parades. Shrewdly, they used them to display imperial power and glory. Remember, this was a world in which there were no newspapers, no TV, no Internet. News spread slowly, mostly by word of mouth. A city like Jerusalem, with its rabbit-warren streets and alleyways, was a hotbed of rumor and intrigue. On the bench outside the wine-merchant's shop, in the line of worshipers waiting to enter the Temple precincts, beside the well as women filled their clay jars with water, the latest news spread like a virus, from one person to another.

An effective way to co-opt this process, the Romans knew, was to hold a parade. The

good folk of Jerusalem would be going about their daily business, when suddenly they'd hear the drums and the trumpets and the marching feet, and they'd run, quickly, to see what was happening, to hear what the Roman overlords wanted them to know. Usually, the message was simple. We are in command here. We are the masters. The emperor in Rome has power and glory like unto a god, and we are his chosen emissaries.

It was effective. The Romans may not have said, "All the world's a stage," but their parades — effective stage presentations that they were — bore the unmistakable message: "All the world is Rome's."

No, Jesus' little demonstration was no competition — as seen by the fact that Pilate sent no soldiers to bar his way. It was a minor disturbance, a little kerfuffle off at the edge of the city. The citizens who witnessed it were mightily amused by the fact that this man dared to make fun of the Roman overlords. Sure, they cheered him on. Sure, they ran and cut palm branches, joining in the merriment.

Sure, they shouted "Hosanna!," which means "Save us!" Not many of them believed this provincial rabbi would really save them, but hey, if treating him like a conquering hero twisted the noses of the Romans, they were all for it.

No doubt there were informers in the crowd. Word would have filtered up the chain of command to the Governor's palace, eventually. The name of Jesus of Nazareth would have been duly noted. And when, the next day, this same Jesus caused a disturbance outside the Temple, overturning the tables of the moneychangers and driving off the sacrificial beasts that were for sale, that would have been duly noted as well — especially by the Temple authorities, who profited mightily from those arrangements and did not like the interruption in their revenue

stream. Jesus' rap sheet was growing longer by the day. Something would have to be done about him, and soon.

For Richard the Lionheart, the people pay the king's ransom. For Jesus, they do not. Quite the opposite. When he needs someone to step up and help him, no one does. Not even Peter, his closest friend.

This is not the conquering king, riding into the city in triumph. This is a suffering-servant king, after the pattern of those famous "servant songs" of Isaiah: one who "sets his face like flint," then lays down his life for his subjects.

Every other king dispatches soldiers into battle — to fight for his honor, and the honor of the nation. This one enters the battlefield — the city of Jerusalem — alone and unarmed, riding an animal of peace.

Every other king plays with relish the high-stakes game of political intrigue. This one is disarmingly simple and direct. He says what he means and he means what he says.

Every other king seeks to argue from a position of strength. This one seems deliberately to seek out a posture of weakness.

Every other king upholds and embodies the law. This one submits to the law, allowing himself to be crushed by it. A peculiar sort of king indeed, this Jesus of Nazareth; no wonder Pilate's baffled, when Jesus finally stands before him, uttering barely a word in his own defense!

Pilate will admit, at the conclusion of the trial in John, chapter 18, "I find no case against him." Now, this is the point when any judge worth his salt would bang the gavel and declare, "Cased dismissed," but we all know Pilate will do nothing of the sort. The man is utterly corrupt:

a tyrant who loves power above all else, and manipulates the law whenever it suits him.

This is why he puts the choice to the crowd: I will free one prisoner for you, Jesus or Barabbas, which will it be? Some ancient manuscripts say the two have the same name: Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus Barabbas. It's as though Pilate is saying to the crowd, "Look, here are two Jesuses. You can have whichever one you want."

Jesus Barabbas, according to John, is a "bandit" — the same word the Jewish historian Josephus uses to refer to revolutionaries. Mark and Luke talk of his involvement in a "riot" — probably some kind of low-level insurrection.

Pilate has a pretty good idea which one the crowd's going to choose. He knows the Nazarene has proved to be a disappointment to them. His little donkey-ride into the city was fun while it lasted, but it was a flash in the pan. The ruckus *this* Jesus raised at the Temple was far more serious. It's turned the ultra-orthodox — and especially the Temple authorities — against him. Pilate needs the cooperation of the Temple authorities in order to govern.

So, this is a way to throw them a bone, without appearing to be beholden to them. Let the crowd do his work for him. Let this Nazarene mystic go to his death. And let Jesus Barabbas have his freedom — for now. Pilate knows where he lives. If the man should turn up dead outside some tavern in a few days, with his throat slit, most people will be able to connect the dots. They will know who really governs this miserable, backwater province.

There's no ransom for Jesus. No one is willing to stand up on his behalf. What Pilate doesn't know — what no one knows, not even Jesus' closest disciples — is that a ransom *is* being paid, after all. It's being paid in reverse. Not *for* him, but *by* him. The ones who are

ransomed are you and me. And the price is his own blood.

So, let us wave our palms. Let us sing our hymns of victory. Let us cheer his triumphal entry. Yet let us also be aware that, between the hosannas of Palm Sunday and the alleluias of Easter there is an arrest, and a flogging, and a trial — and a cross. Let us remember: and be grateful.

Let us pray.

**All glory, laud and honor
to you: redeemer, King.
Fill us with awe and wonder and gratitude.
Make us always aware that,
no matter how many times we fail
to live lives of righteousness,
it is your sacrifice makes us righteous
in the eyes of the eternal Judge.
In your most holy name. Amen.**

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