

**April 13, 2025 – Trinity Episcopal Church – Palm Sunday**

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***When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here."***

**Luke 19:29-30**

I don't know exactly when or where I learned it – perhaps it was in a high school English or Speech class – the “it” being the formula, the methodology, for how to convey information in a paper or a presentation. The threefold instruction that says, *Tell people what you're going to tell them. Tell them. Then tell them what you told them.*

I think the idea behind this advice has to do with clarity and consistency. 'Tell people what you're going to tell them' is about making sure that the presenter or writer is clear about the overall idea they're trying to share.

The 'Tell them' part makes sure that the substance of their message supports their thesis statement, what they said they were going to talk about.

And the 'Tell people what you told them' is meant to give the audience a clear summation, reinforcing what's been said all along.

The life and ministry of Jesus follows this same pattern. Throughout the gospels are accounts of Jesus preaching and teaching through parables,

the Sermon on the Mount, the Sermon on the Plain: all part of his 3 year, 'Tell them what you're going to tell them' presentation to the world. His messaging was clear and consistent, with the same themes repeated over and over: love your neighbor, love your enemy, take care of the poor, the overlooked, the disenfranchised. Forgive those who hurt you. Spend yourself in service to others. Don't hoard wealth. Don't judge. Don't try to get even. Be merciful. Practice humility. Love and respect and honor one another, and in so doing, demonstrate that you love and respect and honor God. There is no commandment greater than these.

The 'Tell them what you're going to tell them' part? Jesus had that *down*.

But he didn't just 'tell them' — Jesus robed those idealistic words with flesh and action, embodying exactly what it means to love everyone, including enemies. How to care for and serve others, feeding and healing people. How to stand up against power and authority, especially on behalf of the people most often overlooked or victimized by the structures of power and authority.

Jesus *lived* the "Tell them" part.

And now, as he's about to make his way into Jerusalem, on the way to his arrest, trial, and death — Jesus launches into the final piece of his presentation: Tell them what you told them.

Today's gospel passage describes the scene, and every detail is crucial, loaded with meaning. I recall one of my seminary professors, a New Testament scholar, who was fond of saying that "everything signifies." Nothing that Jesus does here in this story was by happenstance.

As Jesus and his friends approach the big city, they stop just outside of town, and he instructs two of the disciples to go ahead into a village and bring a colt that is tied up in a particular place – an arrangement that clearly was made in advance.

Jesus' choice of animals conveys a certain meaning, as well, because a colt isn't a very big animal. Can't you just imagine how terribly awkward and out of proportion were this beast and its rider? Jesus' feet must have almost been hitting the ground.

And then there's the crowd, laying down their cloaks and branches from trees, paving and marking what might seem to be an impromptu parade route, but which, at least at first, was likely about as spontaneous as a modern-day flash mob or a song-and-dance number from a Broadway musical. This entrance was planned, and it had a purpose.

We can better understand that purpose if we remember what was going on on the other side of Jerusalem. It was the practice of the Roman occupying force to bring extra troops into the city when large crowds of Jews were expected to visit, like at the time of the Passover festival. The Romans made a big show of their military might, with pageantry and precision, columns of armed troops marching in formation or riding on

large majestic horses.

And let's remember that the Romans were not just a slightly unpopular opposition party. They were the leaders of an entrenched and oppressive social system, a "domination system" as the theologian Marcus Borg describes it, which operated through three major means. (following three paragraphs come from Borg/Crossan's *The Last Week*, pages 7 and 8)

The first means was political oppression, whereby the majority of people were ruled by a powerful, wealthy, elite minority, and "ordinary people had no voice in the shaping of society."

The second feature of the domination system was economic exploitation, with most of the society's wealth held by a powerful, elite minority. How did the minority make this happen? "By the way they set the system up, through the structures and laws about land ownership, taxation," debt management, and so on.

And the third feature of this oppressive social system was religious legitimation, where religious language was used to justify the place of the wealthy and powerful in the social order over which they presided. "The people were told that the king ruled by divine right, the king was the Son of God, the social order reflected the will of God, and the powers that be were ordained by God."

(If you are thinking that these three things sound eerily familiar to much of our current political rhetoric, you're not alone in those thoughts. There is nothing new under the sun, as King Solomon says in Ecclesiastes.)

But let's get back to Jesus' planned entrance into the city of Jerusalem. He's chosen to come to this particular city because it is the epicenter of this extremely skewed and unjust social system. He's chosen to come at this particular time because he knows that the Romans are on the other side of town, doing their power play thing, reinforcing the message that they are large-and-in-charge. And here's Jesus, staging his humble, homespun little parade as a political protest, a demonstration, meant to call attention to and mock what's going on elsewhere.

The whole scenario is a study in contrasts. A peaceful, grass-roots gathering, with everyday people waving their branches and cloaks – like a first century version of “hands-off” cardboard protest signs – over and against the dazzling display of military might, with its implied threat of state-sponsored violence.

(There really is nothing new under the sun.)

Jesus, in his parade, is in the third part of his presentation: his summation, telling his followers, again, what he's been telling them all along. The parade into Jerusalem was, in part, political theater, put on for the benefit of those feeling acutely the hopelessness and powerlessness of being part of the exploited class. Jesus knows and understands the pain of these oppressed people, but reminds them that their freedom is not going

to come by way of a larger or more weaponized army, toppling the Roman Empire, but through the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God about which Jesus has been speaking is not like an imperial kingdom. Its power comes not through shows of force and crushing people underfoot just because you have the money and the weapons to do so. God's power is light, which the darkness cannot overcome. God's power is inclusion, generosity, service, lifting people up, recognizing everyone's dignity and everyone's worth. God's power is realized in relationship and in community.

The Roman parade carried the message of "power over"; Jesus' parade was about solidarity with. The Roman parade trumpeted force, might, hierarchy; Jesus' parade stood for humility and compassion. The Roman parade demanded awe and submission; Jesus' parade invited trust and hope.

The Roman subtext was that if you step out of line, we're here to get you. The message of Jesus was what he had been telling people all along: if you're struggling, if you're hurting, if you're alone, God is here for you.

Simon Sinek is a writer and speaker who writes and speaks about the qualities of leadership, making a distinction between those who are *called* leaders and those who lead. In his book, *Start with Why*, Sinek points out that, "Leaders hold a position of power or influence. Those who lead inspire us. Whether individuals or organizations, we follow those who lead not

because we have to, but because we want to. We follow those who lead not for them, but for [us].” (location 78 of 269, Simon Sinek, Start with Why).

By Roman standards, Jesus wasn't a leader, as his quirky, unorthodox parade demonstrated. On the face of it, the power and the influence – the ability to regulate and rule lives and authorize deaths – was all in the hands of the Romans, with their grand parade on the other side of Jerusalem. But, clearly, Jesus falls into Simon Sinek's category of those who lead. Not only because he was consistent and clear about the way he delivered and lived out his message, but because what he had to say and what he had to offer was what people, especially powerless people, wanted; what people, especially broken and tired people, hungered for: hope, dignity, worth, love, purpose.

The people who lined the streets and waved their branches on the day of that first Palm Sunday parade were shouting “Hosanna” at Jesus....a word derived from Hebrew, whose meaning had evolved over centuries, from being a plaintive cry – “Save me, please” – to a cry of relief, “Salvation has come.” The crowd that followed Jesus through the streets that day were casting their lot with him, not realizing, perhaps, the sacrifice and heartache that the week would bring, but so desperate for the Good News that Jesus embodied, and the freedom which resurrection would bring them, the freedom they did not yet know was possible. *Amen.*