

A Tale of Two Turmoils
Matthew 21:1-11
© Stacey Steck
Preached April 17, 2011 at San José, Costa Rica

And so, Holy Week begins. The turmoil, the roller coaster of emotions, the betrayals, the suffering, the death, it all begins in earnest with Jesus' ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. No doubt, people came to town frequently on their livestock, but far less frequently were they preceded by a crowd of people making a big deal of it. When that happened, it was usually a Roman display of power meant to scare the citizens into submission, but on this day, it was a guy from the margins who had obviously made a name for himself in some circles. In Matthew's gospel, this is the first time Jesus has even been to Jerusalem since his public ministry began. No doubt, he had been to the big city many times in his life, for precisely the same reason he and so many others came this time, for the feast of the Passover, and for other festivals. But he has been absent from this place for at least the last three years, and there would have been no reason anyone there would know him, so the question on the lips of the "whole city," "Who is this?" is a reasonable one. They would have been curious as to why a bunch of palm-waving people would have been shouting a Psalm used for the coronation of a King for someone they had never heard of. Sure, there had been other so-called Messiahs who came to town proclaiming their brand of revolution, so the concept wasn't so

novel, but each time, they needed to find out who might be offering hope, or committing suicide, depending on who you were talking to.

Holy Week is a week of turmoil for us, or it should be, if we are trying to get the most out of it. That is why it is appropriate that the week begins with turmoil in Jerusalem. Near the end of the story tonight, after all the donkeys and palms and hosannas, we hear that “When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil.” Why was that? Why would an entire city of perhaps tens of thousands of people get uptight about one more pilgrim and his unarmed followers? Well, the city was in turmoil because the Roman governor Pilate was in turmoil, or at least, because everyone thought that he might be in turmoil. Matthew describes a very similar mood following Jesus’ birth, “When King Herod heard [that the wise men were asking about the child] he was frightened, and *all Jerusalem with him*”, and we know what happened when Herod got “frightened;” he ordered the deaths of every male child under the age of two in an attempt to exterminate Jesus and the hope he brought with him. It is not necessarily that Pilate, nor the people in Jerusalem, remembered what Herod had done more than thirty years ago, but the same fears, the same politics, the same insecurities got agitated. You see, the Romans didn’t take kindly to pretenders to the throne, and that was how Jesus and his followers seemed to be presenting him. And when the Romans felt threatened, they made life difficult for everyone, and the fear of *that* made for some serious municipal turmoil.

That being said, it is important to note that there were two kinds of turmoil in Jerusalem that day. There was the turmoil of fear of the regime and the citizenry, but there was also the turmoil of anticipation and hope of the crowds who welcomed Jesus. You remember them, the ones who proclaimed, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the name of the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”, the ones who thought he was the solution to their problems with the pesky Romans. The sense of expectation must have been pretty intense for them to extend a king’s welcome, and to risk being seen as co-conspirators. Maybe they thought the authorities would think they were just engaged in some street theatre or maybe they just didn’t care what would happen to them. Perhaps they thought that their enthusiasm would swell the ranks to a breaking point, and the tide would turn, and things would change and they wouldn’t have to worry about the consequences. But whatever motivations brought them there came from that other kind of turmoil, the kind that makes your heart race, and your thoughts jumble, and your words spill out, all at the multitude of possibilities before you.

It is often observed, and rightly so, that the adoring crowds of Palm Sunday turned quickly into the violent mob of Good Friday. It is clear that whatever wrongheaded expectation they had for Jesus went unfulfilled, and once scorned, they set their sights on vengeance later in the week. But be that as it may, although they were there for the wrong reason, they were cheering the right guy. I am

always willing to give this bunch the benefit of the doubt. Really, truly, how could they be expected to understand what kind of king Jesus really was? He may have been riding an animal of peace, rather than war, but is that enough to overcome several hundred years of messianic expectations of the conquering king? Who would have even wanted to believe in the kind of kingdom that Jesus' entry really signaled, even if they got it? Who of them could really have imagined a social and political and religious order based on sharing and servanthood and humility and nonviolence? We can barely imagine that with two thousand years of hindsight! And so even though they finally went away disappointed, I think we should take from them what we can, and rejoice in their moment, embrace the wonderful turmoil that was in their hearts that day, and put it to good use wherever we are able.

Although no one seems to know the origin of the English word turmoil, everyone knows the feeling. Some call it agitation, others anxiety, others hullabaloo, but everyone is affected by it. Sometimes it is of our own making, other times we react to it, but it is a constant in our lives from one source or another. It will not surprise you to learn that the same two turmoils we see in the Palm Sunday story still exist today. We still live with fear, and we still live with hope, and our lives are still affected and directed by them. The genius of Jesus is that he showed us, and still shows us, how to live into the hopeful kind, and how to

leave behind the fearful kind, how to use our hope to transform our fear. The hard part, of course, is actually doing it, but it is not impossible.

Perhaps one way to begin is to pay attention to the kind of turmoil we find ourselves in most often. Do we get agitated for the right reasons? Are we more agitated that the rich keep getting richer, or that we have to pay more at the gas pump or in taxes? Are we in greater turmoil about having to be “politically correct” or about the power of our words to hurt or to heal? Do we get as wound up about the divine possibilities for our lives as the devilish problems? Does our agitation lead us anywhere positive? Or does it lead us down a road of complaints and frustration?

And once we have identified our turmoil, the next place to look to is what we do with it. How is it manifested in our lives? It seems to me that when we are in turmoil with fear, we tend to look inward and to try to defend what we have, or we withdraw, because it is just too overwhelming. Fearful, we don't ask questions because we are afraid of the answer we will receive. Fearful, we pass more laws and build higher fences to protect our way of life and our interests. Fearful, we claim that others are responsible for our problems and never examine our own role. Fearful, we retreat into a private world of pleasure and intentional ignorance, so that we don't have to become engaged with unpleasanties like poverty, and violence and despair. Fearful, we exercise the power we have to keep the power we have.

When, however, we are in the turmoil with hope, the world looks a little different, and we act accordingly. Filled with hope, we develop the right kind of righteous anger, and a creativity to go along with it. Hopeful, we want to get to the root of suffering and do something about it. Hopeful, we make ourselves vulnerable so we can learn from those who are different from us. Hopeful, we raise our voice even though it will attract the fearful attention of those who would try to silence us. Hopeful, we pursue the course of justice even though it will cost us something like a job, a relationship, or even our lives. Hopeful, we recognize when we are slipping toward the turmoil of fear, and we reach out to those who can keep us in that hope.

All of that may be a little abstract, I know, but I hope you were able to recognize something of yourself in one or both of those descriptions. I'd like to finish this evening with a story that might illustrate the two turmoils more clearly, a true story that my friend Jed Koball is living right now in Peru. Jed is a missionary with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and I met him when we were both at the orientation sessions to begin our service. Jed's mission service involves working with grassroots Peruvian organizations trying to better their communities, in partnership with US churches. In particular, he has been working with a group in the community of La Oroya which is the site of the huge Doe Run smelter operation which has been unashamedly polluting the community there for so long

that one hundred percent of the children in that community have some level of lead poisoning.

Enter eight students and two advisors from the University of Arizona who had gone to Peru to learn more about poverty and global environmental issues during their spring break. Part of their experience was visiting La Oroya and learning about the Doe Run smelter, and the attempts of its owners to avoid both the cleanup of the community and to pay the fines levied against it by the Peruvian government. My friend Jed organized their experience in La Oroya and it included painting a mural on the side of a highway, along with some teenagers from the community, and with the express permission of the municipality. The mural was to be an expression of their vision of working together across cultures and distances in caring for creation. Not long after they had begun, they began to be harassed by several workers from the smelter, who demanded that they stop their work on the mural. Well, “several” workers quickly turned into two hundred, among them a manager of the plant, wearing a Doe Run jacket. Within this mass of workers, some 40 to 50 of the workers began to verbally harass the youth while the other workers stood by and observed. The behavior of the workers quickly evolved from verbal harassment to violent action, as they took the paints, brushes, ladders and stools and threw them into the nearby river, but not before painting the team members’ faces. They then began to throw things at the team, including rocks, bottles, rotten fruit and paint cans, before moving on to pushing and shoving.

As the violence increased and the workers tried to steal their belongings, the team began seeking refuge. Eventually, they found a shopkeeper who allowed them to enter and barricade themselves inside. The workers approached the store and began banging on the door, trying to break it down, all the while yelling for the youth and their leaders to come outside. Finally the police arrived at which time the door of the store was opened and the youth and their leaders exited the store. Upon exiting the store, the team members were beaten, pulled by the hair, kicked and punched before being rescued by the police and escorted away to the police station. At the police station, they made official statements of what occurred, and for fear of further danger, they left the city as quickly as possible without even receiving medical attention, arriving in Lima later that night. No arrests have been made. Quite a reaction of fear to a community's hopes for its children to be healthy.

In an ironic kind of way, we are called as Christians to live with some level of the turmoil of fear. It means that we are on the right track, that the powers that be have taken notice of us, for the right reasons. Powers and principalities always push back. They fear the truth. They fear genuine expressions of love. They fear transparency. They like peace and tranquility because peace and tranquility don't protest in the street against injustice. They like stability and status quo, because stability and status quo don't demand change, don't upset any sacred apple carts or moneychangers' tables. They like darkness so their injustices are never seen in the

light of day. The like the turmoil of fear precisely because it paralyzes. All of this is what Jesus rode into town on a donkey to change. We might wish that he had done it with the waving of a magic wand, but instead he chose the way of hope, to leave us with its wonderful turmoil, the kind that sees us through the sorrow and suffering of Holy Week, to the glory of Easter, and a future worth living in. Amen.