

## An Uneasy Sunday

### John 12:12-19    Luke 23:13-25

#### **Luke 23:13-25**

<sup>13</sup> Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, <sup>14</sup> and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. <sup>15</sup> Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. <sup>16</sup> Therefore, I will punish him and then release him.”

<sup>18</sup> But the whole crowd shouted, “Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!” <sup>19</sup> (Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.) [Note: it was a custom every year at Passover time that Pontius Pilate would grant clemency to one prisoner of the peoples’ choosing and release him—to appease the people.]

<sup>20</sup> Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. <sup>21</sup> But they kept shouting, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

<sup>22</sup> For the third time he spoke to them: “Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him.”

<sup>23</sup> But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. <sup>24</sup> So Pilate decided to grant their demand. <sup>25</sup> He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will.

This is the word of the Lord.

When I was a kid growing up in Seattle, the Seafair weekend celebration in the middle of summer was a much anticipated event each year. The arrival of tall ships, the hydroplane races on Lake Washington... it was a big deal. But to a kid,

nothing could hold a candle to the main event: The Torchlight Parade, on the streets of downtown Seattle.

Imagine if you were a small child. Hundreds of people, warm summer evening, cotton candy for sale, colorful floats, police motorcycle drill team, marching bands.

The whole thing was just amazing, a delight to a child. Until... This uneasy feeling would slowly begin to settle over the youngest children. Heads would begin looking up the street. Waiting. Waiting.

Until finally, you heard it: the sound of metal scraping on cement, and shrieks from the crowd. It was...*(slide on)*...the Seafair Pirates. Down the street would come the skull and crossbones, with what looked like real-live pirates, with real-live beards and real-live patches on their eyes, roaring and shooting guns (not real ones) and cackling. "Ay, me-hearties, there be monsters out there!" *(next slide)*

The Pirates would race towards the crowd, scraping their huge swords on the ground. And sometimes they would grab a child from the curb and carry them off!

Kids cowered, and screamed. The Pirates would probably be sued today for psychological damages! But back then it was part of the deal *(slide off)*.

For years, when parade time came, we didn't know just how to feel about it, as kids. We were excited... but not sure we wanted to go. Was it a celebration... or a nightmare? It was a very conflicted feeling.

A little like the feeling of this day, Palm Sunday. Sometimes called Passion Sunday by the church. The kids, so cute and fresh, the triumphant song, "*Hosanna to the son of David!*" The parade of the palms, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem with adoring crowds, Easter just around the corner.

And then before we're barely settled in our seats... Jesus is under trial and shouted away: "*Crucify him!*" And "*We want Barabbas!*"

Everyone wants Jesus on Palm Sunday, and no one wants him on Good Friday. Of course we're uneasy. And I want us to embrace the uneasiness.

The Jesus-parade into Jerusalem is pretty easy to get warm fuzzies over. It's a picture of soft humility. Jesus rides in on the peaceful, lowly, blue-collar donkey. A donkey was a symbol of coming in peace. And here he is again, the humble servant—Jesus goes low again, like he so often did during his three-year ministry. He comes as king, but a very different king.

When Jesus came, it was not with trumpets or fanfare, no chariots, no diplomats, no entourage of powerful people, no soldiers, no prancing stallion, no running horse hurrying him by people. He enters the city, slowly, and in humility.

And the people sing, and they shout. Some in that multitude of the crowd had seen some amazing things happening around Jesus (like Lazarus being raised, as John tells us), and they cheer as he enters Jerusalem, in anticipation. And in their anticipation, they wave palm branches.

But what were they saying with these palm branches? What hopes were they communicating?

Those are important questions, because palms were symbolic in two different ways.

Palm branches had many *joyful* uses. For example, God instructed Moses to tell the people to wave palm fronds to celebrate the *Festival of Tabernacles* (Lev 23:40). *Solomon's temple* had palm branches engraved on the walls and doors, as symbols of worship (1 Kings 6:29-32, 2 Chron 3:5). The prophet *Ezekiel's (40-41) vision of a new temple* had similar decorations. In the apostle John's vision of heaven in *Revelation (7:9)*, people from every nation and language stand before the throne of God, waving palm branches in worship. So, palm branches were joyful symbols of worship.

***But palms have another story.*** Two centuries before Jesus, in the times of the Maccabees (a family of Jewish patriots), Jewish resistance fighters around Jerusalem were battling for religious freedom to worship in the temple, and

fighting for the removal of their Hellenistic/Greek oppressors, and they even succeeded for a while. That's part of the celebration of Hannukah, btw, the recapture and re-dedication of the temple. The struggles included murders, guerilla warfare, and scuffles around the temple. And what was the symbol for these liberators, these zealot guerilla warfare soldiers?... The palm branch. It became a symbol of **resistance**. We even have coins that were minted during this period by the rebels (temple currency), with palm branches on them (**first slide**: *it's hard to tell because of the patina/oxidization, but there in the middle of the coins are palm branches.* **Second slide**: *a Maccabean patriot leader, and on the other side is someone riding on a horse of war with one hand on the reigns and the other hand on... a palm branch*). These are symbols of might and victory (**slide off**).

So, palm branches used for *worship and celebration*. Palms used for *fighting and resistance*. There's some dissonance there, isn't there? So, when the people scurry to the road where Jesus enters Jerusalem, and they wave palm branches and quote Psalm 118, "*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,*" what are they saying? Is this worship and celebration? Or is this anticipation of a revolt? Or is it both, depending on who is there?

At first glance this looks like a nice picture. But let's put ourselves in this crowd for a moment.

You're tired of people occupying your country—first the Greeks, now the Romans. You're tired of other people controlling things. And you've been looking around for a solution that will change things, *and quickly*.

One solution, at that moment, was locked in prison. His name is Barabbas.

Barabbas was aggressive. A man whose method is to counter force with force, violence with violence. Luke tells us he was already in prison for organizing a revolt, an uprising against the government, and for murder. The Romans used *armies*, Barabbas and resistance fighters like him would use *guerilla warfare*.

Barabbas was comfortable on the horse of war. He knew that was the only language the Romans would understand, because they only understood raw power. The people needed Barabbas to get out of prison. And if it took crucifying Jesus so he could get out...so be it. *Crucify him!*

This was probably not a difficult decision for the people, to change their minds about Jesus during the course of this week. Because, as it turned out, this Jesus was different than they thought he'd be. He didn't end up being the warrior savior that they expected him to be, conquering the oppressive Romans and taking his rightful place as ruler and king. No, he was accessible, personal, and

humble. When we look at Jesus, we see a God who was approachable. Jesus riding into town on a donkey would have been not much higher than if he had walked in. Still at eye level with everyone.

Jesus is different than they thought he would be.

Barabbas, however, is *no different* than the people expected. I think that's why he was the popular choice to have released. We understand the things Barabbas represents. Barabbas is efficient. He's all about influence and power. He's a quick solution. He is relief from discomfort.

How do we achieve fast and impactful results? Do that, whatever it takes. How can we get power and control back? Do that, whatever it takes. What strategy will allow us to out-murder the murderous Romans? Employ that strategy, whatever it takes. Whatever we need to do to outmaneuver the Romans, let's do it. The ends will eventually justify the means. So...

*Crucify Jesus! Release Barabbas!*

Christian people often are confronted with questions along these lines. Do I play the power and influence game... or, dare I be more authentically and humbly who I am and let the chips fall where they may? Do I pursue relationships with people who will help me gain advantages because they are people with some kind

of power... or do I simply welcome those I come into contact with, whoever they are?

It happens within the organization of the Church as well (capital C church).

Within the body of Christ are those who believe that we worship, we humbly stay close to Jesus, we make wise decisions as best as we can, we invest in people's lives around us and we wait for the Holy Spirit to guide and to bless.

Others think that the Church needs to be politically sophisticated and savvy, and that the way to effect change is through money and political influence, pursuing power and using it for what they believe are the right ends.

These questions and choices have been before Christ's church since, well, Holy Week.

Back in the 1990's there was a well-known and popular pastor and preacher who was on t.v. every Sunday morning. He had books published and was well-read and well-liked by a significant part of the population in our country. *And...* this t.v. preacher was openly critical of the President of the United States at the time, in various media and even sometimes on television during his sermons. *Until...* he was invited to the White House to participate in the President's annual prayer breakfast, and after that he was occasionally invited to come back to the



White House to consult with the President, along with other spiritual leaders, about issues our country was facing.

When he returned to his home church and his preaching, he couldn't say enough good things about the President. Because all of the sudden he now agreed with everything the president was doing? No. Because... he had tasted power. He now had influence. He became an insider.

What's ironic and sad is that this pastor's megachurch and tv ministry eventually went bankrupt and closed down, and it was all sold to the Roman Catholic Church, which, also ironically, this preacher regularly criticized. So much for power and influence! Sometimes the pursuit of it ends with a fizzling out, like it did in this case. Sometimes, however, it ends with an eruption of conflict and violence.

Barabbas is an example of the latter result of choosing the way of power and influence. And the crowd backs him. *Crucify Jesus! Release Barabbas!*

One interesting thing I found as I studied this: many early manuscripts of the Bible and a couple of older versions of the Bible supply Barabbas' first name here. Do you know what it was? It was *Jesus!* Not an uncommon name at that time (it's the name "Joshua"). His name was Jesus.

His second name, Barabbas, can mean a few things, but one interesting meaning is this: Son of a Father. In Aramaic (an ancient language that helped develop the Hebrew language), “Abba” means “father,” and “Bar” means son. So, isn’t it interesting that the choice given to the crowd of people was between two popular men, both named Jesus, both called son of the father (or *a* father), both interested in freeing people.

And quite frankly, it’s not *that* big of a stretch to see why someone might shout “*Crucify him!*” Wasn’t Barabbas a more realistic hope to change things, and to change them in a way that people were familiar with? And to change them quickly and efficiently?

Believing in Jesus *was a big leap*. It’s *still* a big leap, today. But if you’re under occupation, wouldn’t you rather trust the revolutionary realist, at least for short-term results? Who has the right weapons at his disposal? Guerilla warfare weapons, and the strategic weaponry to attempt to overthrow the government?

Again, Jesus was something entirely different. The weapons and strategy he seemed to have at his disposal were foreign to the people; like: suffering, humility, mercy, compassion. It might not have been difficult to imagine that Jesus was anything more than an ineffective idealist.

And so, they shouted *Crucify him! Release Barabbas!* And their voices prevailed. Jesus was to die. In Luke's almost haunting words, Pilate "surrendered Jesus to their will."

It's an uneasy Sunday. This holy week, God's people are being asked: *which Jesus will we choose?* The one called Barabbas, with the kind of power and influence we understand? Or Jesus the Christ, who looks different. Acts different. Uses different "weapons," if you will.

Over and over God's people are confronted with this question... with this decision. What will we call out? What are we saying with our waving of the palm branches?

As we reflect on this, we are invited to ask ourselves: Do we recognize the king who comes in humility? Do we accept the kind of king Jesus is, or do we still expect him to fulfill worldly desires for power, control, and security? Palm Sunday invites us to examine our hearts and our expectations.

In our world, we often look for leaders who are powerful, charismatic, and capable of fixing our problems in the short term. We long for someone who will make life easier, more comfortable, and more secure. Yet, Jesus shows us a different way. He enters the world not as the ruler we would choose, but as the

Savior that we need. He offers a kingdom not of temporary solutions, but of lasting wholeness, and peace.

Lead On, O King Eternal—sounds like a “battle song” but note the words: “not with swords loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums, but with deeds and love of mercy...” Speaks to the humility of Christ our King, and of how God’s kingdom comes on earth...