

“Where Are the Clowns?”

Luke 19:28-40

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
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This is no ordinary parade. There are no bands, floats or clowns. There is one animal, but it is a donkey, not even a horse. There is a Grand Marshal, but that is because there is only one person in the parade, Jesus the Nazarene.

What is this parade all about, anyway? Why is it re-enacted every year in churches all over the world, including ours?

To begin, it is a counter-procession into Jerusalem. Jesus was not the only one that would enter the Holy City that week with a lot of fanfare. Pilate, the Roman appointed governor of the region would, too, and the contrast between the two processions could not have been more dramatic. The messages they communicated could not have differed more, either.

Pilate would enter the city from the west; Jesus the east. Pilate would ride a horse, the symbol of war; Jesus a donkey, the symbol of peace. Armed soldiers ready to fight and kill insurgents at a moment's notice would surround Pilate. Unarmed peasants waving palm branches and shouting words of peace and encouragement would surround Jesus.

Pilate would attend Passover in order to save his job. He had been warned that if another riot broke out in Jerusalem, he would be banished.

On the other hand, Jesus would attend Passover as a spokesman for the powerless peasants throughout Palestine, a role he learned from Isaiah, Micah, Amos and Jeremiah. He would challenge the religious leaders to make a place at the table for all people, building bridges to them, not walls between them. He would demand that they put selfless interests meeting the needs of all people ahead of selfish interests. He would remind them that their role as leaders was to pursue justice, not a lavish lifestyle.

To say his mission was bold and risky would be an understatement. Why did he do it? What did it require from him? What price did he pay?

He did it because, like the prophets before him, he was moved by compassion for the disenfranchised and poor. He was deeply touched by the plight of the struggling peasants in Palestine. Life was hard for them and made harder by the decisions of their repressive leaders. They were victims of injustice and greed. Tenant farmers worked long hours for little pay. Day laborers went extended periods of time with no work. Many that owned property had it taken away because they were unable to pay exorbitant taxes or debts. Some had their children sold as slaves on the auction block to pay their taxes. Most of them were one drought or illness away from bankruptcy, jail or homelessness.

Furthermore, they had no voice in the affairs of men and no advocate to speak for them. They were completely dominated by those that were in control and had no hope their situation would improve.

Just who was in control? This may surprise you, but it was the religious leaders. When Pilate was appointed governor of Judea, he chose not to live in Jerusalem. Instead, he allowed the religious leaders to rule. The temple became the center of government and the chief priests, elders and scribes were charged with collecting taxes and keeping order.

Jesus saw this as a golden opportunity for the religious leaders to fulfill the hopes and dreams of the prophets. This was the time to lift burdens off the peasants, be an advocate for the powerless and a voice for the voiceless. It was time to pursue justice and give everyone a seat at the table so that all people would be treated fairly, with dignity and respect. It was time to make Jerusalem that shining city on a hill that God envisioned through David and Solomon, an image of the Kingdom of God on earth.

And yet, what did the religious leaders do? They chose to be controlled by the love of power rather than the power of love. They ruled no differently than the Romans. As a matter of fact, they collaborated with them in order to stay in power, squandering their opportunity to usher in peace through justice.

So what did Jesus do? He boldly entered the city at the beginning of Passover for the purpose of speaking truth to power. He came on a mission and that was to be the voice of God and the people. He exposed the religious leaders' hypocrisy, refusing to validate their beliefs, approve their lifestyles or reward their successes.

"Life is not a time for the timid," was the way storyteller Garrison Keillor concluded a tale about a young farmer. Nothing Jesus did that week of Passover was timid and the price he paid for being bold was big. It cost him his life.

When you speak truth to power, a lot can happen and most of it is not good for the messenger. This was true for Jesus. After he overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple the morning after his grand entry into the city, what was the response of the religious authorities? They looked for ways to arrest and kill him, finally succeeding with the help of Judas.

Why did Jesus do this? Surely he knew that he would not escape the wrath of the religious leaders. I'm sure he did, however, this was his mission and he could do no less.

Do you recall his inaugural sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth? "The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened upon him and he began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing' " Luke 4:18-21.

For three years he had fulfilled that mission in small towns throughout the countryside. Now it was time to go to Jerusalem, the seat of wealth and power, and boldly proclaim that message. Even though he knew it could cost him his life, he believed that God would use him to make a difference in the lives of so many that had no other voice. Did his words and sacrifice make a difference? Two thousand years later, we are still telling his story and proclaiming his message of hope. We even call it good news, the gospel.

And now, it is our turn. This is our moment and our Palm Sunday. It is time for us to add our voices to his and make his cause ours. We have been placed here for such a time as this and given an opportunity, just as he was, to be a voice of hope offering healing to a broken world. We have been given the golden opportunity to make the world better through redeeming love. Will we squander our opportunity as the chief priests, elders and scribes did, or will we be a people of compassion and courage as Jesus was?

"Life is not for the timid." How bold are you?