

“Open the Gates!”

Sermon by Rev. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Palm Sunday April 9, 2017

Psalm 118:1-2. 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11

---

“Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.”

Here in Psalm 118 we hear a longing by the psalmist for a flinging open of the doors, both the literal doors to the temple, and the spiritually metaphorical doors that will give the Psalmist access to God.

“The stone the builder rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” This line of the Psalm claims the unwanted, the looked-over, the rejected, becomes the keystone in what God is doing. This phrase of the psalmist probably refers to the boy David, who had been the runt of the litter in terms of military strength, but succeeded in killing the giant Goliath and became a powerful king.

If the Messiah was meant to replicate the military might and strength of David, and secure Jerusalem for the Jews, Jesus would be a C minus kind of Messiah. You see, there were 2 kinds of parades entering different Jerusalem gates this day so long ago, and the one Jesus was in did not look like the expected Messiah.

On one side of the city was a Roman Imperial Processional. Pontius Pilate, who was the Roman governor over the region that included Judea had to be in Jerusalem for the high holy days. Passover was approaching, and Pilate had to make his presence known. A typical processional for a Roman elite was an event. The imperial cavalry, attending soldiers, “leather armour, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on

poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. The sounds: marching feet, the creaking leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums, the swirling of dust, the eyes of silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful.”<sup>1</sup> Can you picture it? Can you hear it?

On the other side of the city came a processional that was a strange parade. Jesus did not ride in on a caravan of the finest horses. Instead, he rode in on a donkey-- and Matthew’s gospel differs from both Mark and Luke by saying that Jesus rode in on a donkey *and* on a colt, the foal of the donkey. Instead of riding in on a powerful stallion, Jesus chose to ride in on a mother donkey still tethered to her nursing foal-- not the sign of military might expected in a Messiah or King. Jesus’ ride is covered in the cloaks of the people rather than an elaborate saddle and tack. And yet, the onlookers cried, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” If Jesus on this donkey was a king, where was the brass? Where was the armour? Where were all the external signs of power and wealth?

The Human Rights Campaign *Out in Scripture* blog suggests that this strange parade was Camp. “Camp is a mode of exaggeration — performance — in order to expose or critique dominant modes of being.” Picture a drag queen decked out in her finest, singing “I Will Survive.” The drag queen’s performance of femininity pokes fun at the cultural stereotypes of gender, and in doing so, subverts or turns them around. In the same way, Jesus’ ragtag procession pokes fun at the power and wealth of Roman rule and offers an alternative vision to subvert the powers that be.

Brazilian author Augusto Boal wrote in his book *Theatre of the Oppressed* about ways street theater can be used to draw in the audience, and to make them actors as well as spectators, to create positive social change. His work was very experimental and experiential. Augusto Boal was a Brazilian educator and theater director who applied the pedagogical theory

---

<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, p. 3

of Paolo Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* into games, theater and play in order to exercise the voices and bodies of the oppressed for their own empowerment and that of their communities. Instead of being spectators in a production put on by people in power, the voices of the oppressed become the storytellers-- and by doing so, have the opportunity to also change the story. As some of us watch Alec Baldwin play Donald Trump on Saturday Night Live, we see in the biting humor an important critique of power, and in our laughter we find the possibility that power can be subverted.

When I led a mission trip to Peru in 2004, our mission was not to build houses or to paint a school or to fix anything. Our mission was to be a participatory audience. You see, during the political violence of the 1980's and 1990's, the military and the revolutionary group The Shining Path fought their war on the backs of the poor. Peasant villages would be taken over by one group, being forced at gunpoint to give the militants food and shelter, only to be massacred by the other group weeks later for harboring militants. Communities that once worked together, pooling resources to provide a subsistence living, were torn apart by distrust.

In one mountaintop shepherding village we visited, the community had a history of bringing their money together once a year to hire a veterinarian to come up the mountain to vaccinate their livestock. After the fighting, the villagers had so much distrust between each other that each decided to fend for him or herself and not add their money to the fund to bring the veterinarian up the mountain. After a couple of years, their livestock died off of very preventable illnesses.

Supported by gifts from One Great Hour of Sharing, the Peruvian Presbyterian church's work in that village and many like it was to work with the youth-- the next generation-- to use the methods of Theater of the Oppressed, such as drama, music and storytelling to tell the truth about what happened during the years of violence. These youth voices, and their

use of the arts, opened a gate of truth-telling that enabled the villagers to mourn the events of the past and begin to talk to one another again as they envisioned a future together. In my mission group, our job was to stand with them at that gateway, to listen and validate the stories, and to bring them back to the United States.

I like to think of Jesus' strange parade as a parody of the Roman Imperial parade. This processional mocked all that the Roman Imperial powers represented, and at the same time it offered an alternative. To give you a little more context about what Jesus and his followers were trying to subvert or change, let me tell you about the political situation in first-century Jerusalem. In their book *The Last Week*, authors John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg describe the program of the Roman government in three ways:

- 1) Political Oppression-- The many were ruled by the few, powerful elites; ordinary people had no role in shaping society.
- 2) Economic Exploitation- Between half and two-thirds of society's wealth went into the pockets of these oppressive rulers.
- 3) Religious Legitimization- The framework of society was given divine purpose, with the king considered the Son of God, and the status of the wealthy considered God-ordained.

The Jerusalem Temple, the principal site of worship of the Jews, had come to mimic the Roman domination system, with many of the chief priests and elders holding and enjoying power given to them by Rome. The biblical rules about land sharing and looking out for the poor had come to be largely ignored by the temple elite. Whereas the temple relied on the purchase of animals to sacrifice on the altar for the forgiveness of sins, Jesus offered forgiveness outside of the temple, angering the religious elite.

Not long after Jesus' procession into Jerusalem, he headed straight for the temple and drove out those selling things there, saying "My house shall be

a house of prayer; but you have made it a den of robbers” (Matthew 21:13).

This is a story that unfolds in images, and I really think images can speak louder than words. So try to conjure up what is happening in this series of images:

- A Roman Imperial Procession
- Jesus’ Strange Parade
- A crown of gold
- A crown of thorns
- The sound of money, the squawk of fowl, the burning of flesh, all for the forgiveness of sins
- The touch of a hand to a body with the words, “Your sins are forgiven.”
- The commotion caused by money tables being overturned in the temple.

Jesus makes a decision. Rather than withdrawing from his followers in the face of his imminent death, he remains very present in the moment. He boldly makes an entrance through the city gates. In Jesus’ preparation for leaving, he rallies his followers in a strange parade. He makes his presence known in the Temple. He continues to anger the powers that be-- even at risk of his own death. And today, we hold in prayer the dozens of Coptic Christians in Egypt-- one of the oldest churches outside of the Holy Land-- who were killed in two separate bombings, while they reenacted this very same palm processional. There is something very threatening about this peaceful parade to those who love evil.

As we head into the events of Holy Week, I ask you to think of the gates in your life. Just as we talk of building *walls* to make us safer, and to keep evil out, it is actually through a *gate* that God enters. Let us remember that as people from many places in the world come to the United States to seek refuge from violence, or extreme poverty, or political oppression. As we

can see with what will happen to Jesus in the coming year, gates do not necessarily guarantee safety. But they do allow us to open ourselves to God.

As we welcome Jesus triumphantly into Jerusalem's gates, may we also welcome him into our hearts and lives. May we open ourselves to the risk that is involved by following him. May we be changed by his presence. Amen.