Preaching Notes for Passion/Palm Sunday, Year C (March 20, 2016)

Rev. Dr. Dawn Chesser

[**Luke 19:28-40**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=123#gospel_reading)

I’m so sick of the presidential election already, I can hardly stand it. As I write these words, we are still early in the primaries. However, by the time you read this, each side will have chosen its candidates; and the real war, the real nastiness, the real mud-slinging will have begun. I don’t know who will be the Republican and Democratic nominees. To be honest, I have my favorite, but I have problems with every single one of them.

Since I don’t know what is going to happen, let me just run down the list of campaign slogans:

*He’s speaking the words that every man wished he had the courage to say.
 He’s telling it like it is.
 She’s campaigning for America.
He’s reigniting the promise of America.
She’s offering new possibilities and real leadership.
He’s calling for a political revolution.
He’s going to restore the American dream for hardworking families.
He’s going to make America great again*.

All these candidates make similar promises: they are going to bring back the strong leadership that will make America great, keep Americans safe, grow our economy and make us rich, protect us from terrorist attacks, grow the middle class, and in a few cases, offer programs to protect the poor. (But let’s be honest, that’s not very popular.)

What makes for a strong candidate in America is the promise that our president will lead us to victory over all our enemies, and indeed, over the whole world.

Not so very different from what the people of Jesus’ day were looking for in a leader on a day so long ago when a man came riding into Jerusalem on the back of a lowly beast of burden.

So let’s just review the circumstances of this little scene that we remember every year on the last Sunday before Easter that we call “Palm Sunday.”

Luke’s version of the story tells us that when Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on the back of a colt, crowds of Jews, who were making their way into the holy city of Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, gathered around to welcome him, and to praise God, and shout out that Jesus was king. They shouted in the spirit of excitement and hope and anticipation. Finally, they had a candidate who was going to be their king, who would advocate for their interests against the Roman government, and help to bring about their dreams of glory.

You remember from the story that when the Pharisees heard the people shouting “Hosanna,” they went to Jesus and asked him to silence the crowd for having called him “king.” And Jesus responded to them by saying that if the people had not said what they had said, then the very stones would have shouted.

That’s a pretty strange thing to say, don’t you think? I certainly thought so -- so much that I decided to look up exactly what it was that Jesus was referring to. It turns out that Luke has Jesus quoting Scripture, something from the Old Testament, of course, since that was the only Scripture there was at that point.

Since he knew how corrupt the religious establishment in Jerusalem had become, Jesus was quoting part of a passage about corruption from the book of Habakkuk. That passage says, “Alas for you who get evil gain for your house, setting your nest on high to be safe from the reach of harm! You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life. The very stones will cry out from the wall, and the plaster will respond from the woodwork” (Habakkuk 2:9-11, NRSV).

So what exactly did he mean by this quote from Habakkuk? Well, Jesus knew perfectly well that the people who were shouting, rejoicing, and praising God were doing this because they were hoping that he would turn out to be the king that they had dreamed of and longed for, one who would look to God for guidance and establish justice where injustice, deceit, and treachery had ruled for so long.

And in fact, that’s why the people took off their garments and threw them on the colt while others broke off palm branches and waved them in the air. In those days, this was the traditional way to signal a change in leadership. But Jesus knew that by riding into the village on a colt he would be signaling that he was a man of the common people instead of the leader of the upper class elites.

Jesus also knew how slim the odds were that things would actually change. There was about as much chance of permanent change as for the stones in the Temple to start shouting out loud.

But Jesus rode into the capital city anyway, despite the odds against human nature changing and despite the fact that he never intended for his kingship to be of this world.

And so when Jesus came into Jerusalem and the people lined the streets and shouted “Hosanna,” they seem to have completely overlooked the fact that their so-called king was sitting on a colt. They missed that very important detail because they were filled with the usual agenda that people have—their own self-interest and dreams of glory, security, power, and wealth.

It was near the time for the Passover Festival. Soon they would eat a ritual meal in memory of how God had saved them out of Egypt long ago, so being saved was on their minds.

**The Passover ritual:** Passover begins for people of the Jewish faith at sunset on Friday, April 22, 2016. The ritual of Passover for Jews is a time of great celebration and hope. Passover is about telling the story of how God saved the people of Israel from the oppression and slavery they were suffering at the hands of the Egyptians.

Every year, people of the Jewish faith recount the story and join together in special feasting and ritual prayers. They remember how the Lord sent Moses to confront the Pharaoh to tell him that he should let the Israelite slaves go free, and how Pharaoh refused to listen. So the Lord sent plagues to convince Pharaoh. But because Pharaoh’s heart was hard, he continued to refuse. Finally, the Lord said to Moses that in the first month of the year, the people of Israel, from that time forward and for all time, were to remember what the Lord had commanded Moses. He was to tell the people to take an unblemished lamb for each family and slaughter it and wipe some of its blood on the doorposts of the house. Then they were to roast the lamb and eat it with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. And on that day, the Lord would pass over the land of Egypt at night and strike down every firstborn human and every firstborn animal. But the blood on the doorpost was to be a sign, and those who are inside the houses with blood on the doorpost the Lord would spare. Then the Lord said that this day of Passover was to be a day of remembrance of all Jews, to be celebrated each year as a festival to the Lord.

After this happened, and the firstborn of the Pharaoh died, the Pharaoh became convinced that the God of Moses was a powerful God. And so finally he set the people of Israel free.

Moses led the people out of the city in a great exodus. But then Pharaoh, when he saw all those slaves, that free labor force leaving his city, changed his mind. He sent his troops after them to bring them back. Moses and the people of Israel came to the Red Sea, and the Lord parted the sea so that they could pass safely across to the other side. Then when Pharaoh’s army came after them, the Red Sea closed back up, the army of the Pharaoh was stopped, and the people of Israel were finally free.

So it was for this festival, this celebration and remembrance, that the Jews, including Jesus and his disciples, were pouring into the city of Jerusalem. This is why the crowds gathered along the sides of the roads when they heard that this new leader, this new Moses, was coming through. They were looking for a new king, a strong leader, who would lead them out of the oppression of Rome and restore them once again to power and glory in the land that the Lord had promised to them.

They could picture it! They could see themselves, led by this new leader who was more powerful even than Moses. He would lead them to overthrow Caesar and his government, and they would become the elites of their nation once again.

So that is the context (the Jewish festival of Passover, which commemorated the release of the Israelite slaves from the captivity of Egypt) that sets the stage for this whole week. This holy week begins with this story of a triumphal entry into Jerusalem amid shouting crowds and waving palms ends Friday night with death on a cross.

It is a day—a moment, really—of triumph that is followed by tragedy. And it is a tragedy that was built on a complete misunderstanding of who Jesus was and what he came to do in this world.

Jesus didn’t come into this world to lead his people in a military conquest of their enemies, the Roman Empire. He didn’t come to set himself as a worldly king or his own people as the elite class at the expense of those who were currently in power.

Jesus came, in his own words, to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

In other words, Jesus came to save the people on the bottom: the folks for whom social programs had failed, the people for whom the minimum wage was inadequate to support, and the people for whom the government medical insurance plan was envisioned.

* He came to eat with sinners, to talk to prostitutes and tax collectors and lepers and folks whom the social order had deemed worthless.
* He came to feed the hungry and visit those in prison, and to equalize the social order so that those who live at the top of society, those who have set their nests on high to be safe from the reach of harm, and cut off many peoples, would no longer be able to enjoy those benefits if their lifestyle came at a high price to everyone else.
* He came to turn the social order on its head.

And his actions, which were nothing short of radical and revolutionary, cost him his life.

Of course, he must have known that to speak out against this system would put him in grave danger. We know that to speak out against a system that enables the [richest 1% to possess more wealth than the combined wealth of the remaining 99% in the world](http://www.bbc.com/news/business-35339475), is to put oneself in danger.

But the hard truth is, that is what our current global economic system does. It makes the rich richer and the poor poorer. Those who are rich and in power are not going to voluntarily hand over their wealth and power to those in need. It is a hard system to break, and it is a system that has been with us since at least the time of Jesus.

So why did Jesus do it? Why did he ride into Jerusalem on the back of a colt, a beast of burden, knowing that all of this would certainly take him straight to the cross?

He did it for faith.

He did it for hope.

He did it for love.

But was what he did just all for nothing? Was it just a waste?

Well, the answer to that question depends on you and me. We are the ones who claim to be his followers. That’s why our houses of worship were built. They were built to keep faith that he gave his life to proclaim alive. They were built to keep hope alive. They were built to keep love alive. They were built so that we would not surrender to the forces of corruption and cynicism and despair.

So woe to us if we use our houses of worship for evil gain! Woe to us if we use God’s house to cut people off! Woe to us if we surrender our faith while in God’s house! Woe to us if we give up hope inside God’s house! Woe to us who let love die while we are in God’s house!

We must not surrender. We must not give up hope.

Instead, we must remember. We must keep the faith. We must risk ourselves in love, lest we forfeit the life that Jesus gave into our keeping.

People of God, I pray that you will never surrender to the forces of corruption and oppression and evil in this world. Be strong in the Lord and in the support of God’s power. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand up against the wiles of the devil.

For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in high places.

My brothers and sisters who preach the gospel week in and week out, let us stand together, having girded our loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod our feet with the gospel of peace. Stand, lest the stones of our houses of worship cry out and the beams of the woodwork respond! Stand up in this world, in the power of Jesus Christ and his righteousness.

(Ideally this sermon should be followed by a reading of the [**Passion Narrative: Luke 22:14-23:56**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=124#gospel_reading))

[**Isaiah 50:4-9a**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=124#hebrew_reading)

While it is unlikely that this lesson will serve as the central text for this day, perhaps there are some ways that the prophet's words might be woven into the larger themes of the day. How do the Suffering Servant songs relate to our theology of Jesus' suffering on the cross? What are some potential dangers of preaching Christ's suffering and death as a blood sacrifice demanded as payment for human sins? If it was God's plan and will that Jesus should suffer, is it also God's plan and will that all human beings bear some suffering? Is this our explanation of what happens to Jesus? Is it our explanation for human suffering? How do texts like this one play into our theology of atonement? What is the response of the faithful follower of Jesus Christ to this text?

[**Philippians 2:5-11**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=124#epistle_reading)

Again, it is unlikely this will be the central text for the day; however, as an early confessional hymn, it would certainly be appropriate to refer to these poetic words describing "Christ's humiliation that leads to his exaltation, of his death that leads to his life" (Laura S. Mendenhall, [*Feasting on the Word, Volume 2, Year C*](https://www.cokesbury.com/product/9780664239183/feasting-on-the-word-worship-companion-liturgies-for-year-c-volume-2/)). How can we sing of our own call to a life that has been transformed by a mind that is now in Christ Jesus? How can we empty ourselves in preparation for the Holy Week ahead of us? How does going from the high to the low that this day brings enable us to bend our knees and confess with our tongues that Jesus Christ is Lord?