

Limited Imprint — Massive Implication  
First Reading - Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29  
Second Reading - Luke 19:29-40

Big events that capture public attention have not been a common experience for me. For one thing, big events tend to happen on weekends, and I am prone to be a bit preoccupied on weekends. In addition, big events that capture public attention mean tickets that are hard to find and extortionate in price, and as the prices spike, there comes a point where I'm stymied by the opportunity cost — *For the price of that ticket, I could buy two pairs of running shoes and stream the concert later...* Also, I grew up in small towns where big events never caused a traffic jam, and would draw no celebrities. The Soybean Festival wasn't going to overwhelm the reservation desk at the Hoxsey Hotel.

However, there are many of you who do not hesitate to set your alarm for dark-thirty so you can get online and in the queue to snag those prized tickets. And occasionally, even Donna and I will break character to go do something big. Every couple of years, we'll go to New York City, catch a couple of shows, listen to some jazz, wander the neighborhoods, and marvel at the spectacle of it all. What amazes me is how many huge, big ticket

events can take place at the same time without tripping over each other at all.

Recently, we took a trip there centered around seeing a much heralded new play debuting on Broadway. George Clooney's *Good Night and Good Luck* evolved from the film he earlier produced of the same name, and is based on the true story of revered journalist Edward R. Murrow's confrontation with Senator Joe McCarthy, whose Senate sub-committee had created a caustic firestorm across the nation by leveling unsubstantiated and mostly false accusations against individuals and groups, claiming they were Communist sympathizers. Though these events were some 70 years ago, they offer sharp and prophetic commentary for our current fractious *Wild West* era of misinformation mayhem.

The play certainly qualified as a *major event* with colossal billboards in Times Square, features on all the morning shows (minus one), an in-depth profile on *60 Minutes*, glossy articles in everything from *Vogue* to *The Economist*; and we were there at the beginning, actually before the beginning because the play was in previews. The premiere would bring out

celebrities dressed in tuxes or the latest haute couture, which means we got to see the show before J Lo and Hugh Jackman.

And yet, at the same time the Yankees were preparing for all the pomp and circumstance of Opening Day; patrons were streaming toward Lincoln Center for the Metropolitan Opera's production of *Aida*; the Knicks were playing Kawhi Leonard and the Los Angeles Clippers at Madison Square Garden; just across the Hudson, March Madness teams were dunking on each other in Newark; the Nets were playing across the East River in Brooklyn; Ed Sheeran was talking it up with Jimmy Fallon on the Tonight Show; celebrities were crowding on the red carpet for the premiere of *Death Becomes Her*; and only a few blocks away, Seth Rogen and Chris Hemsworth were taking the Questioner on Stephen Colbert's Late Show. Just another weekday in New York, and that's only a fraction of the events going on.

No matter how big or how impactful any individual event was, the crowd could well have no awareness of the similarly momentous events taking place just around the corner. In a way, that would be Jerusalem around the time of what we remember and celebrate as Palm Sunday, the day of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. There was a lot going on.

Passover, the feast of Unleavened Bread, was drawing near and crowds of pilgrims were streaming into Jerusalem, as required by the faith tradition of Israel. From near and far away they would come, to celebrate Passover, offer sacrifice, and share the Seder meal. You would hear a mixed bouquet of languages in the streets as the small city of 25-30,000 people ballooned into a city maybe 5 times its size.

You know how Economic Development directors will tout the economic boost that major events bring to a city. You know — *The ACC Tournament will bring an economic impact of \$35.6 million to Charlotte*. Well, imagine the economic impact of a city hosting an event 5 times its size.

Passover: Every Israelite was required to make the journey to Jerusalem, not just once, but annually. To say that was a boon to the city's economy would grossly understate its impact. For along with the pilgrims came the vendors. Once again there would be signs out saying *No room at the Inn*, but you can rest assured that every room booked in the city came with a premium price and a nonrefundable deposit. These pilgrims had to eat, and so the 1<sup>st</sup> Century versions of kiosks, food courts, and cafes were

bustling. The markets in the streets were clogged with pilgrims and pulsing with the cacophony of bargaining.

A primary reason for the pilgrimage was the mandate to offer sacrifice at the grand Temple, and so, like car dealerships on South Boulevard you had this stratification of vendors lined up tailored to target groups. The Mercedes and Porsche dealers were selling bulls and sheep; the Buick and Honda dealers were selling goats; and the used car marts were running BOGO specials on doves. Business was booming, much like the retailers of today who rely on a great December to survive the rest of the year. And guess what? These pilgrims were not all coming from the same place, which meant that they arrived with a variety of currencies that needed to be exchanged for the currency used in Jerusalem and the Temple. They had seen the commercials — *And remember, the High Priest doesn't accept American Express*. And thus, there were moneychangers who saw a business opportunity while also providing a needed service for the horde of pilgrims.

There was a lot going on in Jerusalem and around the Temple. The city was bursting with energy ... and people ... so many people, and that means **security concerns** and **political implications**. Israel understood

themselves as a nation, but their nationhood was fuzzy at best, because they were actually a small outpost of the all-powerful Roman Empire. As with most remote outposts, Jerusalem and Judea were generally neglected unless or until they became an irritation Rome could not ignore. Thus, considering that with Passover you had a city swelling to five times its size, and a population, the vast majority of whom did not like Rome and resented being subject to Roman rule, doesn't it make sense that the political appointees charged with keeping order in Jerusalem would want to make it abundantly clear to all these pilgrims that Rome was in control, and had the power to enforce their rule? Remember, the pilgrims had come to Jerusalem for Passover, a celebration remembering how God delivered this people from slavery to a superpower in Egypt. Rome did not want Israel's sentimentality to transform into rebellion.

Two scholars, Crossan and Borg, point to a parade, different and apart from the parade we read for our scripture lesson today. Wanting to clearly demonstrate who was in charge, and that you just do not mess with Rome, Rome's governor in Judea, Pontius Pilate, would put on his highly decorated military uniform, jump on his regal war horse, his sword at his side and his spear held aloft, and parade into the heart of Jerusalem surrounded by his

soldiers, all decked out as if ready for battle. The message was clear. You don't mess with Rome. Yet, perhaps Pilate wasn't as confident as his parade suggested, because this was a remote outpost of Rome. The pilgrims' numbers could spark a significant threat, and Pilate would not have ready access to Roman reinforcements. Plus, if Pilate didn't keep a lid on the ever-present tensions, any disruption could get him in big trouble with the boys in Rome, putting Pilate on the wrong end of Caesar's sword. Nevertheless, a show of such force might just quell any energy for rebellion.

There was a lot going on in Jerusalem and around the temple, and just outside of the city on the slope of the Mt. of Olives, from which you could capture a great view of Jerusalem, another smaller parade was forming — *“Then they brought [the colt] to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”*

At least in Luke's gospel, this is not a spontaneous event. Jesus had given specific instructions to his disciples about how to set the demonstration up, perhaps having earlier made arrangements with the mule breeder in the village. Otherwise, can't you hear the resistance the disciples would meet — *You want what? ... To do what? ... Listen, I don't care if it's the messiah himself, you're not taking my mule.*

This was a staged event, no less staged than Pilate's demonstration on the other side of town, just smaller, more contained. In Luke's version, the event is limited to the 12 disciples, along with other disciples who had been following along, a crowd but not a massive throng — *“The whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”* The colt, perhaps a small mule, was at times a symbol of royalty in Israel's history. The prophet Zechariah, in proclaiming the hope of a messianic ruler, said — *“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”*



Interestingly, Luke doesn't include palms or branches in his version, but includes cloaks, placed upon the road as a sort of red carpet for the king's colt to tread upon. Perhaps, one year, we should buy armloads of those pashmina scarves available on every street corner in Manhattan, and hand those out on Palm Sunday instead of palms.

It is a scripted event, in a way like the liturgy of Sunday worship, with everyone playing their part. "*Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!*" In fact, Luke edits the original Psalm here, which actually reads — *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord* — a psalm that was typically used as a blessing for those entering worship.

Jesus' act here isn't so much an evangelistic billboard, but more of a symbolic gesture and message particularly for the disciples who were already following him, and in the context of all that is going on in Jerusalem in that moment, like Manhattan at night, this is a contained group and an event that passes without a good portion of population even noticing it, which is also comparable to Sunday morning worship. Think about it, what percentage of folks know that today is Palm Sunday, or even what that

means? How many people see banners touting Palm Sunday and assume we must be having a *Tommy Bahama* themed cookout?

In regards to the first Palm Sunday, at that point it was a limited percentage of folks for whom this would eventually make sense, and a much smaller percentage of folks in the known world at the time who would even notice.

*“[Jesus] sent two of the disciples, saying, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘the Lord needs it.’”* This was a planned, contained event, quoting ancient liturgy with a limited crowd in the context of a bustling, chaotic, larger population rife with agendas, commerce, political tensions, and wannabe Caesars. So, what is Jesus doing here with this mule, this psalm, these disciples? What might he be wanting his followers to understand? What might Luke want the church to take from this?

A planned, contained event, quoting ancient liturgy with a limited crowd in the context of a bustling, chaotic, larger population rife with agendas, commerce, political tensions, and wannabe Caesars who pass us by

without a thought, but with plenty assumptions about the people participating. Doesn't that description fit ... us?

*“The whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”*

In just a few days, as John reports it, the leaders and the larger crowd will be shouting — *“We have no king but Caesar!”* Their hyped up furor against Jesus was such that they were willing to brazenly deny the first three commandments to dispense of this Jesus. Jesus understood the storm rising to meet him. Could it be that on Palm (or cloak) Sunday, Jesus is modeling for his followers and us a way forward amidst the chaos of wars and rumors of wars, market instability, preening Caesars, polarized neighborhoods, and the growing indifference of the larger world around us who cannot understand what we are even doing in here? And yet, Jesus leads his disciples forward in faithfulness.

Yes, there is a lot going on in our world while we gather reading ancient texts, rehearsing ancient traditions, and talking of a kingdom

ignored by many. Yet, these acts of shared worship are the source of our hopes and the heart of our purpose. Isn't Jesus showing us and telling us that in spite of the chaos in our world, our best way forward is to keep following him, as the saints have in the past and as we shall seek to do today and forever? Amidst all the noise, all the claims to power, all the cruelty, isn't Jesus telling us to keep our eyes on him?

When Caesars fuel unwarranted suffering, or act with malevolence and cruelty, aren't we called to follow the one who said, *"In everything do to others as you would have them do for you"* ... and ... *"For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it"* Aren't we called to follow the One through whom Paul said, *"Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good ... and ... Take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.* In a culture teething with stress and depression, aren't we called to the One who said, *"Come to me all who are laden with heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."*

As it says in the faith statement, *A Declaration of Faith*, "[Jesus'] lordship is hidden. The world appears to be dominated by people and systems that do not acknowledge his rule. But his lordship is real. It

demands our loyalty and sets us free from the fear of all lesser lords who threaten us.”

Amidst the restless crowds, the disturbing trends, the claims to power, and the rise of rancor, we are called to serve one king, and one king alone. We are called to follow Jesus. *“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.”* Amen.