

An Ironic, Irenic Messiah
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Zechariah 9: 9-15a; Luke 19: 29-48

A person attending a Washington Nationals baseball game for the first time ever might find it very curious, indeed. The ballpark organ plays just six notes, Bah, bah, bah-BUM-ba-BUM—and an entire ballpark full of fans, in full-throated unison, shouts, “CHARGE!” Or when a run crosses the plate, on cue, all of the Nationals fans know to yell, “N-A-T-S, Nats, Nats, Nats, Woo!”

The Woo! is a crucial part of the chant. It originated some years ago in section 313, according to an article in the Washington Post.¹ It spread from there, eventually got painted on the wall—and it became a fixture. Every game, every Nationals score.

So, if the same newcomer attended a Nationals game for a second time, she would know, when a run scored, that it was time to yell, “N-A-T-S, Nats, Nats, Nats, Woo!” If she brought her child, she would say, “Now when a run scores, this is what we do.”

That is the way that liturgy is learned and passed along. And liturgy is a powerful thing—I can say two words, “Dearly beloved,” and many of you, probably most of you, will know immediately that I am beginning a wedding liturgy. Or if I say “The peace of the Lord be with you,” you know the proper response without my saying anything (“And also with you”).

I could walk into a Walmart in Omaha, Nebraska or in Opelika, Alabama—shout out the words “Christ the Lord is Risen!” in the middle of the sporting goods department, and somebody, maybe several somebodies within earshot would think in their head, “He is Risen, Indeed.” The rest would just go on with their shopping, because really, that’s just another day at Walmart.

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/dc-sports-bog/wp/2014/09/08/how-a-fan-cheer-became-a-part-of-a-nationals-park-wall-woo/?utm_term=.6494f1a936fd

Now, why am I talking about Nats games or Easter liturgies in the Opelika Walmart? I want us to think about the power of certain words or certain actions to immediately get a large group of people on the same page or in the same frame of mind: “Dearly beloved” means wedding.

So that brings me to Palm Sunday—when Jesus comes riding in from the mount of Olives on a colt—with his followers spreading cloaks in the road and perhaps waving palm branches (extra points if you noticed that Luke never mentions the palms) he is enacting a liturgy: everyone knows, everyone knows, everyone knows what is symbolically being evoked.

We speak of “THE Triumphal Entry,” but the New Interpreter’s Bible observes, “Entrance processions were a familiar ceremony in the first century. Numerous kings and conquering generals had entered Jerusalem over the years.”² Paul Brooks Duff writes:

In such Greco-Roman entrance processions, we have seen the following elements: (1) The conqueror/ruler is escorted into the city by the citizenry or the army of the conqueror. (2) The procession is accompanied by hymns and/or acclamations [Hosanna, blessed is he who comes]. (3) The Roman triumph has shown us that various elements in the procession...symbolically depict the authority of the ruler. [Cloaks spread on the road, perhaps boughs or palm branches] (4) The entrance is followed by a ritual of appropriation, such as sacrifice, which takes place in the temple, whereby the ruler symbolically appropriates the city.³

Duff shares as an example the ancient historian Josephus’s account of Alexander the Great’s entry into Jerusalem in 331 BC: “Then all the Jews together greeted Alexander with one voice and surrounded him...[then] he gave his hand to the high priest and, with the Jews running beside him, entered the city. Then he went up to the temple where he sacrificed to God under the direction of the high priest.”⁴

So, with that in view, we look at our passage in Luke: Entry parade, shouts of acclamation, on to the temple. This is an unambiguously political statement by Jesus and his followers. It is the enactment of a messianic claim. Faithful Jews

² Leander Keck, et al, eds. The New Interpreters Bible, Volume IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) p. 366

³ Paul Brooks Duff, “The March of the Divine Warrior and the Advent of the Greco-Roman King: Mark’s Account of Jesus’ Entry into Jerusalem,” JBL 111 (1992) 66.

⁴ Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 11.332-36, trans. Ralph Marcus, LCL (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937) 475, 477.

would immediately recall the words of the prophet Zechariah: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king is coming to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9).”

But—and this is important—there is a deep irony to the messianic claim. When Jesus enacted the claim, those who took him seriously or who recalled the Zechariah text would have recalled the rest of it: “He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the War horse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth....then the Lord will appear over them, and his arrow will go forth like lightning and march forth in the whirlwinds of the South, The Lord of hosts will protect them, and they shall devour and tread down the slingers.”

The messianic vision of Zechariah is of an idealized, unrealized future: the return of a Solomonic king who would restore the military might and the worldly wealth of Israel—it speaks of peace, but it is the peace that is attained through military conquest. Israel has been bullied for centuries by other nations and empires. Since their heyday under Solomon, they have been under the rule of the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, now the Romans. A messiah would bring deliverance from that. Messiah means restoration of POWER, a return to prosperity. And that is NOT the claim Jesus is making: this is what they think he’s saying...peace through power and prosperity. But this is what he’s actually saying: peace through justice. They have no concept of what Jesus is claiming.

In fact, as Jesus draws near the city, as he proceeds down the Mount of Olives and comes to a vista overlooking Jerusalem across the Kidron Valley, he weeps over the city: “If you had only recognized this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.

Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another. Because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.”

And having said this, Jesus continues his procession—right up to the temple, following the path of Alexander the great and others before him. But here he breaks with the familiar: he does not sacrifice with the priest; he does not symbolically appropriate the city.

“Then he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there: animals, doves, incense for sacrifices, those changing Roman coins to Jewish coins because the Roman coins with their human images were not suited for temple offerings.” Jesus doesn’t appropriate or take on the trappings of the Jewish sacrificial system—he disrupts it. He doesn’t make a sacrifice, he makes a scene.

Jesus is prophetically challenging a temple structure that goes through all the motions of ritual and sacrifice but without the actual pursuit of the kingdom of God. His actions disrupting temple worship evoke the words of the prophet Amos who, speaking for God, says:

I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Sacrifice without justice—worship without compassion for the poor—going through the motions of honoring God while tolerating conditions that fundamentally dishonor God? It’s worthless.

You want peace through power and prosperity, a messiah to restore the glory of Israel? To the poor, it makes no difference who’s king. They were hungry under the Assyrians, enslaved under the Babylonians, they worked for unjust wages under the Greeks and Persians, they’ve been oppressed under the Romans and Herod. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss. The tyranny of poverty knows no flag.

If you don't feed the hungry, give fair wages to the worker, shelter the refugee, if the rich don't look out for the poor, then you are perpetuating violence and not cultivating peace. No justice—no peace. That is what Jesus is saying. In the words of the prophet Hosea, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." Sacrifice without mercy is a sham.

Now—In enacting the liturgy he has enacted, and in disrupting the system of sacrifices in the temple, Jesus has caught the attention, and not in a good way, of some very powerful people. The Romans are likely cautious—they aren't likely to cotton to anyone riding into town in the midst of the Passover celebration and disturbing the "peace," which is another way of saying challenging the power of the prosperous.

And the religious leaders—well they are nothing short of outraged. Jesus has just called their leadership counterfeit, called them out as either complacent or corrupt or both. So now, we can understand the ending to our scripture lesson: Every day, he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people—the fat cats, the ones who are doing just fine under the present circumstances, thank you very much—they kept looking for a way to kill him. The just peace that Jesus advocates DISRUPTS or threatens the unjust peace that sanctions or perpetuates their livelihood.

Now—the trick to getting something out of this passage or really any scripture passage is to make the leap from understanding to application—from "what is going on in this passage" to what does it mean to us, what are we to do about it today?

And the learning for us, I would suggest, is to in our imagination move the Palm Sunday protest to the present. What if Jesus came riding into Springfield or DC today? Would he observe—in our government, in our leaders, in our communities, in our lives the things that make for peace? Would he see the hungry fed, the poor advocated for, the refugee welcomed? Would he see our advocacy for affordable housing, for available and equitable health care for all, for just wages, for strong public education? And where those things were lacking—would he see houses of worship that were complacent and complicit...or would

he see our churches hard at work cultivating the fruits of the spirit and laboring for the coming of the kingdom?

Would he see a nation that wants genuine prophetic peace through justice—or would he see a nation satisfied with power and prosperity? Would he recognize a nation of liberty and justice for all—or one that gives lip service to those things without embodying them?

As I contemplate those questions, I personally am challenged by them. I am challenged by Jesus' assertion that you cannot enter the kingdom of God by following the ways of the world.

We think we know what Jesus is saying and doing in his Palm Sunday message—but do we? Do we get it even yet? Or might Jesus weep over us as well? And might we even yet reject the one who comes to save us from ourselves? Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Amen.