

April 9, 2017 Palm Sunday/ Passion Sunday
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Matthew 21:1-11, Isaiah 50:4-9a
Philippians 2:5-11

(Star Tribune, 4-6-17, pg. A1. The Last Week, Borg and Crossan, pages 2 and 3.
xQuote from DavidLose.net posted 3-15-16)

Grace, peace, to you, this holy day. Amen.

At the end of our Palm Sunday gospel, Matthew tells us, “When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’” Who is this man?

Now, ultimately, it’s the “Who is this?” question that will ground us as we enter Holy Week, but I admit it was the word “Turmoil” that first captured my imagination, my heart.

I’d never noticed it before; what with the drama of palms, Hosannas, donkeys, those last lines escaped me. But this week Turmoil caught my attention, and my mind’s eye settled on an Associated Press photo and caption that I saw on Thursday: A Syrian father, Abdel Hameed Alyousef, cradling the limp bodies of his 9 month old twins, his spouse and other relatives also gone. Lord, have mercy.

Turmoil this week in what has been years of Turmoil in Syria: the deadly chemical attacks, our nations response, the process, the debate, the grief.

And turmoil, too, in Egypt, in Stockholm, in St. Petersburg, in Venezuela.

Turmoil in our own homes, in our own city, in our own hearts. Lots of turmoil.

The gospel reads: “When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’”

Between Hosannas they might have paused to explain, excitement in the air, pointing to Jesus:

“This, this is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee, **that’s who this is.**”

Historians Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan went back and pieced together the culture, and the records, and found that there were actually two processions in Jerusalem that spring day that we call Palm Sunday in the year 30.

The one we re-enact with palms and Jesus riding a donkey, a colt, and shouts of Hosanna—that was the peasant procession; it entered Jerusalem on the east side.

The other procession came in from the west; It was an imperial procession with Pontius Pilate flanked by columns of cavalry, marching foot soldiers, leather armor, banners, weapons clanking, drums beating.

This was the “motorcade” of the time ushering in Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, arriving, as he did every year at this time, to keep order in the city during the Jewish festival of Passover.

Two different processions, but the similarities are striking, and meant to be ironic,

no wonder they asked, “Who is this?”

Jesus’ procession was a counter-procession, if you will.

The *imperial procession* honored the Roman Emperor who the people worshiped with titles like savior, lord. The other procession, the *palm procession, the peasant procession*, lauded this humble Jesus, who preached mercy, and welcomed sinners, and dared cross the powers of the time.

Two processions: that alone would raise the tension in the city, stir up the questions.

Add in the coming Passover, the streets swelling with pilgrims, families making preparations.

Then there were the politics, a city occupied by the Romans, pushing back on the oppressor's thumb.

Don't forget that dance, that strategic dance, between the Jewish religious authorities and the Roman hierarchy, all in the name of power.

The whole city was in turmoil, Matthew tells us, and they were asking, Who is this? Who is this man?

That's really been the question at the heart of our readings throughout Lent. Who is this?

The **Samaritan woman** at the well dared answer that question with candor, boldly confessing Jesus.

The **one born blind** confessed Jesus again and again: this is what I experienced, this is how he healed me.

Nicodemus came stealth-like at night to speak with Jesus: Who are you? he wondered.

You know, it takes Nicodemus a quite a while to answer that question for himself, but it's there:

Remember that it's Nicodemus who will show up again at the cross, on Friday, after Jesus has died,

lugging myrrh and aloes, confessing by his readiness to help Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus' body.

Even through their tears and grief, Lazarus' sisters, Martha and Mary, are confessing Jesus.

We've focused this Lent on confession, as in confessing our sins, confessing what blocks our way to God.

Truth is there's another kind of confessing that's been going on—the kind of confessing where we say:

This is who Jesus is. This is where I'm going to place my trust. In this life's turmoil, this is how I will live.

Palm Sunday is also called Passion Sunday:

we look ahead to the week when our cries of Hosanna, become shouts of Crucify Him.

The power of this day, this week, lies between these cries of praise and these cries of suffering.

In our tumultuous times, **how far we will go to answer that question, Who is this?**

Are we content to cry out Hosanna? Or will we move through the turmoil and go to the cross?

The cross where Jesus dies not so that God can "forgive us, but rather **to show us that God already has forgiven us**" and fiercely loves this world.

I invite you into Holy Week, full of tradition, full of holy mystery, full of the turmoil and suffering of this time, the tears of our hearts...and the great mercy and abiding love of Jesus Christ. Amen