

Palm/Passion Sunday

March 28, 2021

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The story of holy week, the story at the heart of our faith, only pours fuel on the fire of our passion, our passion for God's dream of justice. The story is clarifying. It calls out for our courage to go big!! In our decisions as a city, as a state, as a country and in our lives and the life of our congregation. This story does not calm anything down. I'm sorry to say...

Some call Mark a war time gospel. It was time of tumult, revolution, high revolt, with all eyes on Jerusalem, the center of it all, a place redolent of possibility or of shattered hope.

We are hearing this story in a different way this year after everything we've been through and what we're still in the midst of. Minneapolis is at the center of the George Floyd story: The next chapter soon to be determined: National Guard is at the ready. And Minnesota is at the center of another story: The protests are growing and the world is watching: Will we allow this pipeline to go in? We're hearing this Holy Week story in the midst of all of this and it is resonating in a new way. Mark's story of the Last Week is also full of protests and nonviolent direct actions and judges and trials and complicity and courage and history and whole sight and constricted compartmentalized thinking and despair and hope...

There is no doubt where God is in these stories.

And I repeat, the Bible story, if we really have ears to hear, doesn't calm anything down.... Even though we may long for the nostalgic palm Sunday of our childhood and be so ready for going back to normal and for making peace with the other side and reconciling with families and friends who have de-friended us on Facebook... But make no mistake, our Bible story pours fuel on the fire of our passion for God's dream of justice. Our passion to co-create what Jesus called the kingdom of God on earth...

"Don't worry about them. They are just nice church people." you can imagine the-powers-that-be thinking... Except for the smart ones who aren't so sure... "hmmm...Those religious people... they are the very ones we need to worry about...In fact, I think I might agree with them...."

Blame it on Jesus. He started it. Or the prophets he studied. They started it.

He was a poor country boy. He was Jewish and his faith meant everything to him, all the days of his life. His parents brought him up devout. And then they could barely get him away from the temple. Remember that day when he was 12? He knew the Torah, he knew the prophets and the psalms backwards and forwards, he did. And this shaped how he saw the world. But then he noticed something, a great disconnect between how the world really works and how God meant for it to work.

When he became a man and he started his lifework of loving the people, he healed the people downstream as it were, in the countryside, but knew something had to change upstream, at the head waters, in order for them to really heal. He taught the wisdom ways of living but realized the people could never fully live because of what was decided upstream about how they must live... He shaped communities of full inclusion and equality but it could only go so far because of what was coming down from upstream.... He taught about the kingdom of God but came to realize that unless he went upstream to the source of this suffering and oppression he could not really make the difference that he was born to make. He had to go to the center of power, to the source of the poisoning, to the heart of the domination system of his land...to Jerusalem....

He went away from the crowds to pray. To go deeply into his true self which is of God. And everything was clarified. And he was given the courage to do what he had to do.

He went to Jerusalem to expose the truth to the people and to confront the powers that be of the domination system.

The domination system. Do you know what that is? For those who have ears to hear, listen. The domination system is rule by the few. Increasing concentration of wealth. And religious legitimization. It was not unique to the Roman empire and their elite Jewish collaborators. Nothing unusual about it all. Rather, It's like that automatic setting of civilizations... Sort of the human animal social system default ... Again, it consists of these three elements.

1. Political oppression—with rule by a few
2. Economic exploitation—a high and ever increasing percentage of the society's wealth goes into the coffers of the wealthy and powerful
3. Religious legitimization. They say: This is just the way it is...

Jesus... who knew that he was not only a wisdom teacher, a prophet, a healer, mystic but he was also a brilliant debater, could have been a great trial lawyer, and community

organizer, of planned prophetic public actions. That's to say that all of his life energy, charisma, sharp intellect, creativity was at the service of his passion for God's dream of justice. According to Mark, it was never about himself, it was always about God's love for God's people and it was about the prophetic dream that one day "they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid;"

Jesus wasn't alone in this passion to overthrow the empire and the domination system and to get his religion right again. There were many different Jewish groups revolting against the Roman empire. But Jesus and his companions parted ways with others when the violence started. Jesus' loyalty to God was never compromised. He was utterly committed to a just economic system AND to nonviolence. His prayer life kept him on this path.

I was surprised by an insight that came to me this past week while marinating in the gospel of Mark and the scholarship of Borg and Crossan. I don't remember having this insight quite this way before in my life. Maybe this has already occurred to you. Maybe when you were 12! This insight that's made me fall in love with our religion all over again, or our religions, the three Abrahamic faiths... It is astonishing to me that this religion of ours somehow emerged in human history well over 3000 years ago with the assertion that God, the creator of all, intends for the world to be organized radically differently than it was being organized, and that we must make major repairs; this assertion that what is is not what ought to be... Astonishing that this alternative vision came into being, the gutsiness of this, saying *this* is what God intends for God's beloved creation... and not THIS, this domination system-- a few in control, concentrated wealth, religious legitimization...Astonishing that this prophetic imagination was birthed into the minds of the great Hebrew prophets.... And astonishing how this prophetic vision of God's dream of justice has taken over people's lives throughout history... and how societies and governments really do move towards this vision, never perfectly, or they fall away from it as we have in the US during the last 40 years of incredible wealth and power concentration, and then they, we, have to return once again with big political acts, often led by deeply faith formed people.

Those two processions into Jerusalem that spring day!?! Just imagine! The masses didn't even know there could be another processional, another way... and their faith?, well it had been compromised by the big preachers of their day, the rabbis and priests, who were the prophets and instead offering their blatant or tacit blessing to the wealthy and powerful... Well! on that day, the peasants, the working people, awoke to Jesus passion for God's dream of

justice ... and they began to question how hard they were working and why it is they can barely care for their family and where all that money was going anyway and that maybe this is not the way God intends for it all to be set up.... No wonder the elites become so disturbed by this other processional... why! this peasant Jesus is awakening the masses!

And we might wonder: How did we get so far away from this political meaning of holy week?... Could it be that the theology of substitutionary atonement, that this unblemished perfect human being had to somehow be sacrificed to atone for all of our sin, and this focus not on this world but on the next, on being saved for eternal life... we wonder whether *this* theology was encouraged by the domination system years later to divert the people from the political to the personal, from life on earth to life eternal. ... Just wondering... The substitutionary atonement theology is nowhere to be found in the gospel of Mark, the earliest gospel. It is not the only Christian understanding of Jesus's death. It was perhaps touched on in the Nicene creed of 325 but it took more than a thousand years for it to become dominant, thanks or no thanks, to St. Anselm.

Let's stay with Mark's gospel this week and ask ourselves: which processional are we in? the one with the empire and the elites or the one with Jesus and the peasants? The one carrying the domination system or the one carrying God's dream of Justice?... It's complex. Of course it is. And not always obvious. There were wealthy leaders who sided with Jesus. And When you move from protests to sitting down at the table and creating policy, the devil is always in the details. There will be unintended consequences even with the best laid plans.... But still you have to choose. Which processional do you give your heart to. Everyone's particular life situation is different, but still you have to choose... which processional? Where do you give of your self, your energy, your time, your money, your positional power?

Is Jesus your personal savior?

Is Jesus your political savior?

Both... they are one in the same. Or what is the purpose of life?

Source

Borg, Marcus, and John Dominic Crossan, [The Last Week](#), Harper, 2006.

