

March 24, 2024

Palm Passion Sunday

Mayflower UCC

Rev. Susie Hayward

Texts: Mark 11:1-3, 7-10; Luke 19:41-42; Mark 11:15-17

### *A Story about Us*

Twenty-five years ago, I spent six months living in Kathmandu, Nepal, studying Buddhism. I was in college, majoring in Religion. I had chosen to study in Nepal because after sitting in classrooms learning about Buddhism by reading complex philosophical theories written by third century Indian ascetics, I was skeptical that I had learned anything about Buddhism as it's actually lived and practiced. And so, I packed a bag and shipped myself to Nepal, where I lived in a neighborhood of Tibetans in exile whose life revolved around a large, pot-bellied Buddhist *stupa* they circled daily while they murmured mantras, lit candles, and gossiped. I had gone to study and practice Buddhism among these Tibetans, but I found pretty quickly a lot of religions in the Kathmandu soup – Hinduism, the indigenous *Bon-po* tradition, Christianity, Sikhism. Nepal was an amazing place to study religion because it was everywhere – on street corners, on altars in the internet shop where I checked my email, in the middle of chaotic rotaries, nestled into the crevasses of mountains on hikes through the Himalayas.

But by far, the best was religious holidays. Because on those days – often when a sacred statue would be taken out of its enclosure in a temple and paraded on the street – everyone, and I mean *everyone* would come out. It didn't matter which religion that statue was claimed by, if there was a religious street party, people were coming. The figure of the Bodhisattva Tara or the elephant god Ganesha or the Virgin Mary would be held aloft by a bunch of folks in the center of a swarm, as everyone cheered and roared, laughed and sang, as the stray dogs darted around our feet chasing the food bumped from our hands. Those in the center of the throng, the ones holding up the statue, were sometimes drunk – usually drunk -- and so the statue they held up would inevitably sway back and forth unsteadily like a kid crowd surfing at a punk rock concert. But somehow, miraculously, it stayed aloft.

I think of those scenes, that feeling of being carried along in a raucous, heaving crowd for a ritual gathering that is holy and otherworldly but also very worldly and sweaty and smelly, every time Palm Sunday rolls around again. Those wild religious street parties in Kathmandu took place in the face of a rising Maoist insurgency in the hillside that was displacing thousands into Kathmandu. They took place among the reality of many Tibetans living in political exile, some recovering from political imprisonment and torture. They took place in the face of fairly extreme poverty in a small country caught between the geopolitics of its powerful neighbors India and China. And every time, they were a reminder that those challenging worldly realities the community was navigating weren't the whole story. There was always another, bigger story about the divine being told simultaneously that we could participate in... ideally with rainbow colored powder and curry dumplings.

This story of Jesus entering Jerusalem holds similarities, but also many differences. It was a time of religious holiday, Passover – the most high holiday of the year -- when many pilgrims would travel to Jerusalem to commemorate their ancestors' liberation from enslavement in Egypt. And these were

also a people subject to the power of a foreign force – in this case, the Roman Empire who ruled Judea. Meaning, the Passover celebration of liberation occurred in a context of military occupation. Rome recognized the threat inherent to their occupied people throwing a freedom party, and so every year at Passover, Rome sent its own people to Jerusalem to display its military power, reminding the Jews of their place and not to get any ideas. But Jesus, our Jewish teacher, he was full of ideas – precisely those liberatory ideas Rome found threatening. Ideas about releasing captives and justice for the oppressed. And riding into the city on a colt among *campesinos* and fishermen and tax collectors and sex-workers and sick folks and immigrants and children – all waving palms – he bore this message to imperial, violent Rome; just as he bears this message for us, today.

Us, here, citizens of the world’s biggest superpower, the modern economic and military empire of the world. Us, the modern-day citizens of Rome.

Beloved, as we begin this most holy of weeks in our liturgical year, I must say a word about what is taking place in Gaza, and in the wider holy land, the setting for our holy week story that begins today. The land where Jesus himself lived as a brown-skinned Jew under occupation, taught, and was killed by the machinery of Rome. Believe me, the Israeli-Palestinian so-called “conflict” would not have been my choice of topic for the first time preaching to a new community. We are only just getting to know each other, to trust each other. This topic is so complex, so raw. Couldn’t I just speak about something easy, like climate or queer justice? But to hear the scriptures read today and not speak to the awful violence taking place in Gaza, much of it funded by our own tax dollars as citizens of Rome, it would be a dereliction of my vows as a minister ordained by the people to preach the message of Jesus.

And what I have to say is this, clearly and plainly: what is happening to the people of Gaza right now is an abomination and it must end immediately and completely. Over 32,000 people killed, at least 70% of them children and women.<sup>1</sup> 13,500 children, dead.<sup>2</sup> 80% of the population displaced.<sup>3</sup> Homes, mosques and churches, hospitals, universities, decimated by military assault, all of which constitute war crimes by international law. Thousands of children orphaned or forced to have limbs amputated without anesthesia. Life-saving medical aid, food, and other supplies not getting to the people who need it. Dire warnings about imminent famine by world bodies and experts.<sup>4</sup> All this to a people who are stateless, who’ve been subjected to military occupation for 60 years and a blockade for 18, without freedom of movement and many other rights that would come with citizenship, thousands detained without charges, now trapped under relentless bombing and unable to find safe shelter. Now dying of hunger and malnourishment, or shot and killed when they swarm the few food aid trucks that get in. A people subjected to five months of carpet bombing on a tiny

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<sup>1</sup> National Public Radio. *Gaza death toll surpasses 30,000 but it’s an incomplete count*. February 29, 2024. [link to NPR print and radio stories](#); France24. *US and Israel hold tense talks as Gaza truce plan fails at UN*. March 22, 2024. [link to article on france24.com](#)

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF. *More than 13,000 Children Reported Dead in Gaza as Famine Nears*. March 19, 2024. [link to article on unicef.org](#)

<sup>3</sup> CNN. *More than 80% of Gazans have been displaced since Israeli-Hamas war began, UN agency says*. December 4, 2023. [link to article on cnn.com](#)

<sup>4</sup> The Guardian. *We are about to witness in Gaza the most intense famine since the second world war*. Op-ed by Dr. Alex de Waal. March 21, 2024. [link to article on Guardian.com](#). See also [this article](#) by the World Health Organization.

strip of land that represents one of the most densely populated places on earth, at a rate of death and destruction not seen since the Vietnam War.<sup>5</sup> A people being killed relentlessly by bombs made in the USA, largely funded by our tax dollars – 14.5 billion of them sought by our President to support this military assault -- in a campaign that has been able to continue because of US vetoes in the United Nations – at least until Friday when the US finally proposed a ceasefire resolution that Russia and China vetoed. This all should chill us to the core.

Beloved, I do not deny the broader situation in Israel and Palestine is complex. Those who seek to dismiss or deny the reality of the horrors Hamas inflicted on October 7<sup>th</sup> against innocent Israeli citizens or of the antisemitism we've seen rise in the past five months – a venomous hate that has historically caused untold suffering to Jewish people before and after the founding of the modern state of Israel – do us, and the cause of peace, no justice. Antisemitism is a real and lethal threat in this world.

Christians have much to repent for in this regard. Our tradition has been complicit in driving antisemitism and anti-Jewishness. By how we talk pejoratively about the Hebrew Scriptures – or “old testament” – and the God described in them. By how we have historically described the events of holy week and the treatment of Jesus in his time, drawing from the language in our Christian scriptures. And still today, by how we all too often identify ourselves *out* of this story about who Jesus is confronting in ways that make us feel comfortable-- not recognizing that these texts are not about some “them” – whether the Jews or Romans, or even conservative Christians or violent terrorist organizations. These stories are about *us*.

The truth is, as Americans, we *are* Rome. And, as followers of Jesus, we *are* the Jewish people of these texts – all of them. Those precious few who defended Jesus *and* the many more who condemned or abandoned Jesus when things got nasty and complicated and unsafe. Even more so we are the overwhelming silent majority in the story who stayed away because they were afraid, or didn't want to offend, or thought what was going on wasn't about them.

This story of Palm Passion Sunday is about us.

And, this story of Israel and Palestine, Gaza specifically, it's about us too, as both Americans and Christians.

And I believe this year in particular, Jesus is confronting us.

So what will we do? How will we respond?

I pray that we listen to Jesus and follow his lead. Listen in a few days to what he says about those who live by the sword. And just as Jesus served as both pastor and prophet, I pray we hold – deeply

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<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, in the West Bank, there has been a surge in civilian-led violence and military raids against Palestinians to displace them and the building of roads and illegal settlements since October 8<sup>th</sup>, as attention is on Gaza. Wall Street Journal. *Visual Evidence Shows Illegal Settler Construction in West Bank Surging*. March 6, 2024. [link to video journalism piece on wsj.com](#). see also: Reuters. *Israeli forces kill 10 Palestinians in West Bank in 24 Hours*, Wafa news agency says. March 21, 2024. [link to article on reuters.com](#)

hold – the anguish of all those connected to our holy land – both our Jewish and Muslim neighbors, the trauma experienced by both Israelis and Palestinians over time – without letting pastoral compassion supplant the prophetic call to speak out in defense of the oppressed. I have faith that through following the example of Jesus we can do what may sound impossible: we can recognize the vast power differences in Israel and occupied Palestinian territories and speak for the systematically oppressed without demonizing the oppressor nor dismissing Jewish vulnerability in this world. We can condemn hate and violence in *all* its forms, as Jesus did – rejecting the claim that to criticize violent Israeli state action is antisemitic or that naming and criticizing Hamas violence sets back the cause of Palestinian liberation. We can recognize that Palestinian and Jewish liberation is bound up together and work for a future when both can share the land – and the world -- safely and freely.

We must. Because what's happening in Gaza is not just about Palestinians and Israelis, it's about *us*, too. It is U.S. Christian ideologies that have offered justification for the ongoing displacement, occupation, and oppression of indigenous Arab Muslims and Christians and now the current atrocities taking place in Gaza. We must because US policy and billions of our own tax dollars every year have fueled the cycles of violence on the holy land and in the broader Middle East, without securing safety for Israelis, much less Palestinians. We must in keeping with the reckoning sparked at 38<sup>th</sup> and Chicago [George Floyd Square] that calls us to account for the persistent violence seeped into so many of our systems that harms brown and black bodies disproportionately -- here in the US and outside our borders. We must because the gospel tells us that violence and war will never, *never* solve our problems, particularly our most complex and protracted ones.

We must because Love demands it of us, even as He walks toward his own death this week.

Praise be the one who comes in the name of peace, who calls us to see the things that make for peace. Will you follow him into Jerusalem? Into DC? Calling for war no more, a permanent ceasefire, the release of all hostages and captives, comfort for the grieving, food for the hungry, healing for the sick and injured, liberation for all the oppressed and the occupied, security for all the vulnerable so that the temple of the holy land might become a place for *all* nations. And then will you do the work to make it so? Put your body on the line for it, like Jesus? It is not as easy as it sounds, friends. This is a path that will ask things of you that are hard, and a faith in the nonviolent path to justice that many – on all sides -- will say is naive. But it is a path that brings a reward beyond measure. Just wait, you'll see.

Come and follow, Beloved.

Come and follow.

Amen.