



EXTREME MAKEOVER
Luke 19:28-42

The day after Christmas, 2007, there was an eruption of violence in the Holy Lands. Two groups hurled stones at each other's heads. They beat each other with iron bars and wooden sticks. The local police were called as usual to restore peace to this warring madness. Several of the police were injured restoring order. However, there was a strange twist this time. It was **not** a clash between Israelis and the Palestinians. It was **not** a street brawl between the Palestinian factions of Hamas and Fattah. It was a battle between the robed priests of the Greek Orthodox Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church. The brawl took place inside the Church of the Nativity where church tradition shares that Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, was born. We believers have a bad habit of doing an extreme makeover of the Christ to suit our purposes and plans.

It would be easy for us today to be judgmental of these priests and servants of God at the Church of the Nativity. However, the body of Christ in America has had enough failures of its own this past year to keep the press and media rolling full speed ahead.

Now you can understand why Jesus weeps over the city of Jerusalem, the Holy Lands. Even today, you know the things that would bring you peace.

It was not easy to be a disciple of Jesus Christ then or now. Parades and processions are one thing – discipleship is another thing. On most Sundays, I ask you to remain standing and we rightfully affirm our faith – sharing the words of the Apostle's Creed. It is easy to share and affirm our faith in this beautiful church sanctuary.

We are protected in this fortress-like building with its thick walls and stained glass windows. However, the benediction is given (for those who stick around long enough to hear it) and then we have to go out there. Our faith, then, is forced to go public. The examination or test begins.¹ What do we affirm in word and deed out there?

Personally, from a small lad – even to this day – I cherish the Palm Sunday story – the triumphant entry into the Holy City. It speaks of courage and commitment and one who follows through on that courage and commitment.

From John's gospel we learn of the palm branches in **12:13**. Matthew shares the prophecy from Zechariah. Mark shares the excitement and electricity from the crowds. Luke shares this Kodak moment of our Lord weeping over the city of Jerusalem and sharing of its eventual destruction.

Luke's account of the Palm Sunday story is more subdued than the other evangelists' accounts. Luke's makes it quite clear that what is taking place is not connected to a political or military power process.² Something greater is taking place that will affect the entire world. As Luke shared in the birth narrative – what is happening is happening for **all**.

So Jesus comes to the Holy City where – in **Psalm 84:1** – it declares it is the city where God himself dwells. This is the city where – according to **Psalm 122** – all go to worship the living God. This is the city where – according to Isaiah – all the nations shall gather.³

Why is it that the most religious city in history is the site of the worst religious persecution?⁴ Why till this very moment – the year 2008 – the most intense hatred and violence continues to dominate the landscape and spread across the world?

Why do we want God to hate our enemies like we hate our enemies? The last time I read **John 3:16** it shared that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. The epistle of **I John** resounds with the message that God is love. If we cannot love our brothers and sisters who we can see – how can we love God who we do not see? In the Sermon on the Mount - the greatest body of teaching of our Lord – he instructs us to love our enemies. During Holy Week he demonstrates it in word and deed.

Why do we continue to reject the invitation to follow our Lord Jesus in faithful discipleship? Why is it that the kingdom that Jesus came preaching is always at odds with our little kingdoms? As Dr. Fred Craddock reminds us: “It is easier to wait for a Messiah than it is to follow one.” The life of Jesus isn't a success story. It is a salvation story.⁵ Jesus heard the roar of the crowd – but is not overtaken by it. A far deeper call and purpose guides and directs him. He will not allow the crowd to make him over according to their image and idea of what a Messiah should be. He will have to do an ‘extreme makeover’ of their concept of a Messiah.

Yes, first century Jewish expectations had fixed on the Mount of Olives as the site for the appearance of the Messiah. As Jesus prepared to present himself at the Jerusalem Passover – he partially fit into their expectations. However, he confounded them by selecting a plodding beast of burden to ride rather than a dashing war horse. Festivity and excitement was in the air. They wanted a piece of the action and even shouted out, “Hosanna, Hosanna,” which means “Save us now!”

However, when the tables began to be turned over – they soon realized Jesus did not come to endorse the status quo. It's tough to admit that you need an extreme makeover. Now you understand Nicodemus's challenge when Jesus said, "Ye must be born again."

The religious establishment had become so accustomed to the noise of moneychangers in the Temple – they failed to see that it actually crowded out God to the back of the stage. However, let children sing and their noise fill the air – that was intolerable. It is amazing the religious baggage that clutters the heart and soul of the church today. Soon the crowd learns that their response - as short as it was - would play no part in guiding the ministry of Christ. There was a deeper call than the roar of the crowd.

In a moment of great excitement and expectation – Jesus enters the Holy City with the crowds following behind. They were convinced they had a winner. He was the Messiah who would topple the old order of Roman imperialism – and bring in the New Era. Many of the Jewish believers – as was their tradition – sang one of the great processional hymns – **Psalm 118** – which we sang a few moments ago. However, with emotions at a feverish pitch they made a small – but crucial – change in the psalm. The Jewish believers – instead of chanting "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" chanted "**Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord.**" Then the disciples – instead of chanting "From the house of the Lord we bless you" chanted "**Peace in heaven and glory in the highest.**" Unless Jesus had been a keen student of sacred scripture – an extreme makeover was in the making.

JESUS KNEW WHO HE WAS. Yes, he was their King – but not the king they envisioned. They envisioned a mighty warrior king who would lead them with swords against their enemy. Jesus' mission and ministry were much greater and deeper. His battle was against the powers of sin and evil and not a mere political opponent. Jesus had come to begin a new creation. Finally, here is the One for whom all creation had waited and longed for since our expulsion from the Garden of Eden. An extreme makeover was required and only Christ had the authority and power to do it.

The Pharisees understand quite well the radical discipleship being demanded – the extreme makeover – and reject it. They tell Jesus, "Rebuke your disciples!" Then Jesus shares one of the greatest verses in all of sacred scripture, "**I tell you,**" **he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out!"**

From the moment of Jesus' entrance into the world – opposition arose from the Evil One. However, all the gospels declare that there is truth which marches down the corridors of history – and it cannot be stopped. This truth cannot be silenced. God will provide a witness even if every mouth be stopped.⁶

It declares - while opposition to the Christian faith is quite real and intense – it will not succeed. Love can be and will be crucified – but it cannot be defeated.

No lie can live forever. In the struggle between good and evil – evil is doomed. So, while the demands of discipleship are not easy – we know that in Christ we have the words and ways of eternal life. So that is why we are drawn to the Palm Sunday story and celebration.

Before his election as a Bishop of our denomination, Dr. Willimon said to his congregation at the historic Duke Chapel, “When I consider how demanding the gospel is, I can’t believe how many of you got dressed this morning and came down to hear about it.”⁷ We come because we are drawn to the eternal call of God. We come because God in Christ only – has the words of eternal life. We come because we are part of a kingdom over which not even the gates of hell can prevail! The extreme makeover is well worth it. In this makeover we find out and discover the truth about God, our world, and ourselves.

Shortly before Dr. Willimon left to become Bishop of the Northern Alabama Conference, he shared this real-life story with his beloved congregation at Duke.

A young man from a well-known and respected United Methodist family in North Carolina attended worship service every Sunday at the historic chapel. He was an outstanding student near the top of his class in the prestigious School of Law. He took his faith seriously. He was involved in a Bible study and prayer group. His family had great plans for him after graduation. He would join a well-known prestigious law firm and make full partner in a matter of years. He would be a millionaire in a short time.

However, late one afternoon Dr. Willimon received a phone call from his parents. They were quite upset. It seems their son came home over the weekend and said he was going with an evangelical missionary group to Haiti and dedicate his life to helping the poor and oppressed people of that nation. The young man had really come to respect Dr. Willimon. The parents asked Dr. Willimon to go and talk their son out of his decision and commitment.

They said, “Dr. Willimon, our son responded to the challenge in one of your sermons about following and serving Jesus. Would you please go and help him change his mind?” Dr. Willimon could not honor their request. The young man went to Haiti.

The young man’s parents, after some time of reflection, said, “You know, all of our lives we wanted our son to be a respectable Christian and Jesus called him to pick up the cross and be a real one.”

It was not easy or convenient to be a follower of Christ then or now. Extreme makeovers are never easy, but worth all the effort in this endeavor because Christ alone has the eternal words and ways that lead to life.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

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ENDNOTES

¹ William H. Willimon, **“Pulpit Resource, January-March, 2008,”** page 47.

² Fred B. Craddock, [et. al.], **“PREACHING THROUGH THE CHRISTIAN YEAR,” YEAR C,** first edition, Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, PA, 1994, page 166.

³ Ibid, Craddock, page 166.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, **PRAYING WITH JESUS,** Harper Collins Publishers, 1993, June 30th Devotion.

⁵ **CONVERSATIONS: THE MESSAGE WITH ITS TRANSLATOR, EUGENE H. PETERSON,** NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1623.

⁶ Ibid, Craddock, page 166.

⁷ This comes from the pen of William H. Willimon. I am unable to document the exact source of the quote.