

“Save Us!”
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April 9, 2017, Palm Sunday: Circle of Mercy

Our text tonight is Luke 19:29-41. I’m reading from the New Revised American Version:

When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his billionaire cronies, saying, “Go into the town ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a stallion that has been ridden many times in war. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord wants it. And what the Lord wants, the Lord gets.’ If necessary, pay off its owners with a bribe. Close the deal with whatever it takes.” So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them.

Then they brought the warhorse to him. They threw upon it their cashmere suit jackets and silk ties from the famous fashion line IVANKA, which stands for Incestuously Vain, Arrogant, and Narcissistic Killer Apparel. Then they lifted him onto the spirited steed. As he pranced proudly through the crowd, he proclaimed, “This is the biggest Passover parade ever—a million people at least!”—though the Roman centurion estimate was seventy-three people and a few stray sheep.

The multitude began to shout with a loud voice, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of himself!” To these he said, “I’ll tax the poor and cater to you. I’ll dismantle the academies and double the chariots. I’ll slash dung cleanup in the streets and beef up DAFT, the Department of Alternative Facts and Truth.”

And on the other side of the road, the ragged people waved palm branches and shouted “Hosanna!” which means “Save us! Deliver us!” To these he said, “I will save you. And I will deliver you—from the perverts and the prostitutes, the criminals and the crybabies; from loathsome lepers, radical revolutionaries, and woefully wise women—by driving them all into the desert. I’ll send the Parthians and Medes, the Elamites and Mesopotamians, the Egyptians and Libyans, Romans and Arabs back on camels where they came from. But before they go, I’ll make them rebuild the wall around Jerusalem and close off all her gates—the Sheep and Fish Gates, the Horse and Fountain and Mercy Gates—except for the Dung Gate, out of which our olives and arms will flow to every corner of the earth. And all the world will see and worship our exceptionalism.”

As he came near and saw the city, he wept for joy, saying, “You, all of you, recognize the things that make for war!” And as he charged into Jerusalem, he shouted, “Drinks for all at the Jerusalem Towers Inn!”

This is the word of truth for the people of lies, brought to you by the New Revised American Version, also known as *The Massage*—because it feels so good.

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Well, OK, maybe it didn’t happen exactly that way. But I wanted to make a point, because sometimes we forget just how audacious and unexpected the piece of satirical street theater known as the triumphal entry really was.

The Jews were longing and looking for a Messiah to save and deliver them from the horrors of occupation by the Roman Empire: the brutal exploitation of their labor, the high taxes forced upon them, the poverty they couldn’t escape, the complete disregard for their health and well-being and the common good. They pictured a Messiah much more in line with the version

of the story we just heard than what they ended up with. They wanted a warrior-king. And they got a humble teacher-healer whose idea of a triumphal entry was to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey that had never been ridden before. It was a piece of comedy designed to expose and poke fun at both the tragedy of their situation and the absurdity of the men who ruled over them.

It's likely that a second "grand entrance" was happening that same day. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, kept his chief residence and office at the beach, in Caesarea on the Mediterranean Sea. I think it was called Mar-a-Lago...but I may be confusing it with something else. Pilate also had headquarters in Jerusalem, and a footnote in my study Bible says that "because of the large crowds at Passover, [Pilate] came up to Jerusalem to help keep order." He may well have been arriving with his entourage from the west at about the same time that Jesus and his disciples were entering from the east. They represented two very different types of power, headed for a showdown.

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Exactly twenty years ago, in the spring of 1997, I was in Syria with a group of Atlanta-area seminary students and faculty. I hold many images in my mind of that beautiful country: the bustling souk, the market in the heart of Damascus; the gorgeous embroidery that Syrian women are known for; the biblical Street Called Straight, which is the oldest known road still in existence.

But the picture that remains most vividly, like a stunning postcard, is from our trip at dusk to Palmyra. Centuries ago caravan drivers were guided to this oasis along the trade route known as the Silk Road by fires at night and the glint of sunlight off the city's gilded columns during the day. We walked under the ancient arches, amid the sacred ruins of the temple, palace, and amphitheater, where resting camels were silhouetted against a brilliant red ball of sun and the air shimmered and glowed.

The tombs there were the playground of gypsy children. As the sky darkened, their parents gathered in their sheep and lit a fire. A little girl held out her hands, begging for candy, and I handed over a pack of LifeSavers. She said "*Merci*," "*Danke*," and "Thank you." Moments later, she sold it to one of my colleagues for twenty-five Syrian pounds. A young multilingual entrepreneur ensuring the survival of her family.

The professor who led our sojourn in the Middle East has kept us all on an email list, and I heard from him this week for the first time in a few months. He reminded us of the tragic destruction of Palmyra's ancient wonders by ISIS in January. He took us back through our journey from Damascus to that jewel in the desert, on a route that ran south through Homs, with a stop there to visit with families who lived in domed mud huts in the shadow of a military base. "As near as I can tell from the news reports," he wrote, "this is the location of the Al-Shayrat airfield, from which the Assad government delivered the chemical weapons and which our missiles hit overnight."

"When Jesus came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!'" Jesus still weeps over our dying cities and our ravaged earth, over last week's horrific chemical and missile attacks and today's Palm Sunday bombing of two Coptic churches in Egypt. He is still deeply grieved by our relentless refusal to see and do the things that make for peace.

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My other lasting memory of Syria is of a visit to the village of Maaloula. In a small church there, candles cast dancing shadows on cold stone walls, as a gray-haired priest in a blue robe prayed the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic. Rain and hail pounded the roof—a rare spring storm

in the desert—and lightning knocked out the electricity, paralyzing the well. “We usually serve our guests water,” the priest explained, “but because of the storm, we’ll give you sweet wine.” As he ushered us toward delicate glasses, he announced proudly that he was serving “the best aperitif in Syria.” In one of the few villages left in the world that still speaks Jesus’ tongue, a priest changed water to wine, and I was a beneficiary of the miracle.

In a time such as ours, we need to remember and cling to the miracles. And so I want to share the most recent one I witnessed. I’ve been meeting for about two months with a group of women called *Mujeres Unidas en Fe*, Women United in Faith. We’re about ten Spanish-speaking and ten English-speaking women who get together for three hours in the middle of the day every Thursday at a church near my home. We spend the first hour doing Bible study in Spanish. Before sharing a potluck lunch, we devote our second hour to things like exchanging language lessons, and getting in place family emergency plans and powers of attorney related to the care of children—in the event that one of the undocumented mothers gets deported.

Fear has been running very high ever since Trump’s executive order about stepped-up actions against immigrants. And so these brave women, instead of laying low and shuddering in terror about the possibilities, decided that they wanted to meet with members of our county law enforcement, to introduce themselves, tell their stories, and ask questions. To our great surprise, this past Thursday the sheriff and half a dozen of his deputies, the chief of police, and the head of the university’s campus security showed up—along with several local pastors who were also invited.

The *mujeres* prepared an amazing feast of tamales, tacos, empanadas, and flan. They were clearly nervous and scared at first. But they found their voices, asking questions and sharing their concerns and fears. Rosita, in tears, spoke about her beloved nephew who was kidnapped and murdered in Mexico. With her two-year-old son Rafael sitting in her lap, she voiced her terror about the possibility of being sent back to violence and poverty and being separated from her children.

The officials listened and responded in ways that made the women feel heard and safe. None of us can know what more is going to come down under the new administration, but the word we got on Thursday was that immigrants are welcome in our county and local law enforcement has no plans to cooperate in deportations. The sheriff pointed out that federal money isn’t exactly pouring into our rural pocket of North Carolina, and the U.S. government has little leverage here. We can’t know what the future will bring, but the fact that this meeting happened, and the open and gracious spirit that prevailed throughout it, felt downright miraculous to me.

So, friends, in a time of despair, when we weep along with Jesus over all the suffering around us and across the globe, I say, “Create miracles.” Speak truth to power, like the bold *mujeres* of Madison County, and be vessels of transformation. We are, after all, people who believe in miracles.

We know that the Holy Week showdown is coming as Jesus and his disciples, and Pilate and his cronies, converge on Jerusalem. This week we move through a swirl of emotions—from tonight’s adoring parade through Thursday’s betrayal and Friday’s agony of the cross. But the parade and the cross are not as contradictory as they might seem at first glance. By choosing to enter Jerusalem carried by a donkey, Jesus was embracing the humility, submission, and nonviolence that would carry him to the cross.

I confess that, if I had been in that beseeching crowd, I likely would have been with the many who hoped to catch a glimpse of a strong leader with the might to smash all oppressive

power, to crush all who wield it, and to bring peace on earth by force. I sometimes hope for that now. Seeing images of children burning and writhing in pain from a chemical attack can do that. I want to scream “Save us!” at the top of my lungs and in the depths of my heart, and I want that salvation to come on my terms.

But God has a distinctly different strategy. And we are invited to be disciples and witnesses to that good news. The challenge for us, I believe, is to live neither in denial of the power of death, nor by giving it the last word. Because we know the ending of the story. Resurrection follows crucifixion. The miraculous happens. And it hasn't stopped yet.

Amen.