

Sermon: Walking Towards the Mob**Scripture: John 12:12-19****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: March 24, 2024**

At the start of this Holy Week, Jesus enters into Jerusalem amid shouts of cheer and adoration, praise and admiration, excitement and hope, this man of the people, this healer of bodies and souls, this advocate of the oppressed, provoker of the powerholders, liberator of the bound had come to the very seat of power in Roman-occupied Jerusalem to bring heavenly authority where earthly authority had failed so many. And by week's end, he'd be dead.

It's the same story over and over again where the bearer of social challenge and social change is murdered by those who benefit from the way things are, but this story is the original one that came somewhere mid-way in human history drawing up into itself all the violence that had come before and drawing proleptically from the future all those still to come in a single cruciform moment where God Godself was mobbed, judged by human judgment to be deserving of death, executed by human cogs in a human system, a system that resists liberated souls cause liberated souls tend not to be good cogs or willing commodities.

This is why we come back to this difficult moment year after year, time and again, to Jesus - God's Beloved son, Humanity's Great Teacher, Love's Devoted Emissary - His entry into Jerusalem, his suffering therein, his walk to the cross and his death so we can maybe this time get it better engrained into us what happened and is bound to happen again unless we listen to him and follow him and become a part of him and allow him to become a part of us.

For what this story teaches us, our culture counters. Our culture says "believe in yourself! All you gotta do is believe in yourself!" Our spiritual tradition

says “Wait, be very careful about yourself, better you do not believe in yourself too much!”

Because the truth of the matter is that we have this strange tendency, we humans do, to deceive ourselves about our own righteousness and to turn the sour and the bad within us onto the people around us. And when we get together in groups or go to social media and group think begins to take over, that tendency becomes more pronounced. That is the story of Palm Sunday when Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem began with shouts of “hosanna” and ended with shouts of “crucify him.” It’s the story of how faulty our judgments can be, especially when we feel SO clear that we are the righteous ones and they are they – whoever “they” are – are the unrighteous. Then we should pause and not believe in ourselves so much, be suspicious of that little righteous tyrant within us that shows up in our drive to correct and dismiss and judge the people around us.

And we should be very suspicious because once not all that long ago we got it so terribly and dramatically wrong that we had God Godself, Love LoveSelf, Truth Truths Self, among us and we didn’t believe him or want to hear him, we betrayed him, we denied him, and executed him with an instrument of torture. Can you believe it? That’s how terribly wrong we humans can get it – not the Romans and the Jews of that time and place but, we humans – we, all of us.

The thought experiment that the origin story in the scriptures was grappling with was just this - how we humans can get it so wrong so often. So they wrote this symbolic story which, in a quick synopsis, goes - the Creator made all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, and the human being was made with the Creator’s image within them, made free, and in this freedom they grabbed ahold of the only fruit that was forbidden for them to eat which was

hung on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and they ate it! And when they ate it they came to believe in themselves. They believed that through that they had gained the divine knowledge of good and evil and as a result needed no longer to rely upon God for His wisdom and his knowledge but could make their own judgments about all things, which immediately began making a mess of things because their judgments were not God's, of course cause they were extremely limited in what they saw and what they understood and so their judgments were often terribly faulty – if I just rid the world of this person, all will be well. If our tribe just eliminates this tribe, finally it'll be ok. If I can subjugate this person, dominate that group, rule over this region, silence those people, then what has been wrong will be made right.

And here's the kicker - always and everywhere all the time the people doing the judging and the violence and the dominating believe that what they are doing is good and right.

There's a fascinating podcast that puts its finger painfully on this truth and grapples with it for 7 episodes. It's called "The Witch Trials of JK Rowling".¹ The host of the podcast, Megan Phelps-Roper, comes from the family that made up most of that awful Westborough Baptist Church who protests at LGBTQ events and funerals. She extricated herself from her family and that church in her late teens and does this podcast in part to explore what haunts her life which is "how could I have gotten it so wrong when I believed I was so right?" She explains that her family believes whole-heartedly that the vitriol with which they protest all things LGBTQ arises out of love for those very people they're screaming at because they are so convinced that their souls are in jeopardy, that they are going

¹ Phelps-Roper, Megan. (Host). The Witch Trials of JK Rowling, Feb-March 2023, The Free Press.

to go to hell if they don't renounce their homosexuality. And here's something you might not have known about them – they are highly educated, a family full of lawyers and one of the grandfathers was a passionate civil rights lawyer during the Civil Rights era. Lest we think that our education makes us less prone to self-deception, it does not.

She refers in the podcast to the perpetrators of the Salem Witch trials as well, the clergy and town leaders who executed women they believed were witches. These too were the most highly educated people of the day who searched the sacred scriptures and agonized in their hearts about what was right and came to the chilling conclusion that they did. I'm giving you two examples that involve religion but don't be deceived that religion is the problem. There's also plenty of examples of nonreligious ideologies that led to horrendous violence against others believing they were acting for what was good and right – Mao Zedong, Pol Pot, Joseph Stalin, or objective scientific exploration in Nazi Germany, to name just a few. It's a problem of our HUMAN condition, not the problem of our religions... it's just that our religions become tainted of course like everything else with our human sin.

And to bring it to this day, with the roots of his own family in the soil of that holocaust horror, Netanyahu, believes what he is doing in Gaza is right, just as Putin believes what he is doing in Ukraine is good and right. And to bring it closer to home, the abuse of others in the name of righteousness is a modern-day phenomenon going crazy on social media as well where people become so outraged by others, convinced of the evil of the other, and so certain of their own righteousness which snowballs into social capital punishment eliminating the offender before they have had any kind of fair hearing. And here we are in the

midst of this contentious and concerning election that is coming up and as we look around don't we see that most everyone believes that they are on the side of the good and the righteous and that the other side is deceived and is dangerous? It's a powder keg. Just like the one that was awaiting Jesus in Jerusalem that day.

But such black and white thinking is not afforded us as followers of Christ who keep our eye trained on his walk into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and to Golgotha on Good Friday, we no longer are allowed to believe in ourselves willy nilly, to claim that we are the righteous and others are unrighteous because we remember and we know how wrong we can be. The Spirit of the unjustly Crucified and Risen Christ will not allow us to rest so easily there. I mean, don't get me wrong, we Christians do, but we shouldn't. Cause what the story of Palm Sunday and Holy Week tells us is that God came among us and, believing we were doing what was right, we killed Him, forever then calling into suspicion our own righteousness.

So do not believe in yourself if you are feeling particularly scandalized or disgusted by those who are voting for Trump in November, or Biden.

Do not believe in yourself if you want to cut off people who are holding different social, political, religious views from yourself or wanting to blame and shame them, do not believe in yourself.

Do not believe in yourself if you are convinced that other people changing their ways is what is needed in this world.

Do not believe in yourself if you are feeling punitive towards others who hold different views and would like to see them pay for it. Do not believe in yourself.

Do not believe in yourself if you think a post on social media is the answer, a remark on X, a lawn sign that shows how progressive and open you are. Do not believe in yourself.

Instead, believe in something higher, believe in God.

Believe in the one who suffered willingly at the hands of those who knew best and were more righteous than all others, the ones who believed they knew absolutely what was right and what was needed... believe in the one they crucified.

Believe instead in the one who was crucified under our human certainty and the name of our human goodness and righteousness and who turned around in the end, after all their terrible wrongness was revealed, and loved them and forgave them nonetheless.

Believe in Him. Trust that guy.

Amen.