

Why? Lent 6  
Why go to Jerusalem  
March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008  
Jeff Clinger

Luke 19:29-38

*29 When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, <sup>30</sup> saying, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. <sup>31</sup> If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" just say this: "The Lord needs it." ' <sup>32</sup> So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. <sup>33</sup> As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, 'Why are you untying the colt?' <sup>34</sup> They said, 'The Lord needs it. ' <sup>35</sup> Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. <sup>36</sup> As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. <sup>37</sup> As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, <sup>38</sup> saying, 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!'*

This Lent Steve and I have been preaching through a series of why questions; exploring and wrestling with questions about faith and life. As we began, we talked some about Jesus and some about miracles, both generally and in relationship to some of the specific miracles that Jesus performed. Last week Steve turned our attention toward some of the actions of Jesus and wrestled with the question, why turn over the tables in the temple? This morning we turn to the story of Palm Sunday and ask why would Jesus go to Jerusalem?

It was February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2004, when, following our Ash Wednesday worship service, I loaded up with a group of parishioner's from Whiting United Methodist Church and headed to see Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*. I had heard the negative press regarding the film, I had heard the lofty expectations for the records it would set, but I wasn't sure that I was overly excited to see it. I simply felt that I needed to as a

Pastor, so that I could discuss it from an informed perspective with all of the people from my congregation who I knew would be seeing it.

Some of the people with whom I saw the film were really impacted by it, taking from it a powerful message of God's love. Others were quite dismayed by the over the top violence that the film depicted so graphically. The reactions had by people with whom I saw the film were quite representative of the reactions held by many across the country.

Some people loved the film. Some people very strongly disliked the film. Some people were so put off by the graphic violence, especially as it was portrayed to be something that God needed, and in turn really struggled to connect with the film. Regardless of your personal opinion of the film, and whether or not you even saw it, I imagine that my even mentioning the film conjures up images in your mind. What images first came to your mind when I first mentioned Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*?

The over-the-top use of graphic violence was one of the many themes highlighted in this film by a number of reviewers.

Peter T. Chattaway in *Christianity today* compares this film to the blood and gore of Gibson's other works like *The Patriot* and *Braveheart*. He states that the film dwells, at considerable length, on the physical pain inflicted on Jesus and asks, "Has Gibson found a way to baptize, as it were, the sadistic or masochistic impulses of his other films?"

Ty Burr of the *Boston Globe* called the film "a profoundly medieval movie" and states that it is, "Brutal almost beyond the powers of description, more obsessed with

capturing every holy drop of martyr's blood and sacred goblet of flesh than with any message of Christian love.”

The observations that these two make of Gibson's film reflect a broadening trend in our culture toward increasingly violent images. And while there have been many studies done in recent years that draw links between increasingly violent media and an increasing amount of violence in the lives of our children, there have also been a number of studies that seek to disprove these first types. Regardless of how we ultimately interpret the data, one fact cannot be denied – both the violence that we see on screens and the violence in our world continue to increase. And this at least begs the question, could these two phenomena be related?

Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is one very specific portrayal of what Palm Sunday and holy week are all about, blood, gore, sacrifice. A traditional understanding or reading of Palm Sunday and holy week show Jesus riding high on his animal waving to the adoring crowds while they sang to him and waved palms. Looking back at this story through the last 2,000 years of Christian history and theology we understand these people to be singing and celebrating because Jesus is going into Jerusalem so that he can be killed so that our sins can be forgiven and so that Easter morning can happen.

This traditional point of view would answer the question, “Why ride into Jerusalem?” with a response that sounded something like this. Jesus knew that he had to ride into Jerusalem so that he could be tortured and killed so that our sins could be forgiven. Just as with their reactions to the film, people react in quite different ways to this answer to the question. Some find comfort and meaning in the fact that Jesus died so that we could be forgiven. Others are troubled by the amount of violence present and by

the implication that God, a God who we claim is all loving and all powerful, requires a blood sacrifice in order to offer forgiveness.

Assuming that Jesus knew everything that was going to happen, even though he might have had a pretty good idea, is probably misguided; assuming that the crowds who were waving their palm branches and shouting hosanna knew everything, is definitely misguided. If these crowds knew exactly what was going to happen in the coming week why were the women who came to the tomb on Easter morning so surprised? Why were the disciples who encountered the resurrected Christ after Easter morning so slow to realize who he was and so surprised when they did?

It is safe to assume that they did not know all of the details of how the story would unfold, but nonetheless they were waving their palm branches and shouting hosanna as Jesus rode into the city. “Why did Jesus ride into the city?” remains an important question. Another important question for us to think about would be, “why did people wave palm branches and shout hosanna?”

Let’s look again at the story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem, a story that I imagine is familiar to many of you (Luke 19:29-38).

*29 When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, <sup>30</sup>saying, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. <sup>31</sup>If anyone asks you, “Why are you untying it?” just say this: “The Lord needs it.”’ <sup>32</sup>So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. <sup>33</sup>As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, ‘Why are you untying the colt?’ <sup>34</sup>They said, ‘The Lord needs it.’ <sup>35</sup>Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. <sup>36</sup>As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. <sup>37</sup>As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, <sup>38</sup>saying, ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!’*

*Peace in heaven,  
and glory in the highest heaven!*

Processions such as these were not uncommon during this time period. According to the commentary in the New Interpreter's Bible, "numerous kings and conquering generals had entered Jerusalem over the years."

In their work, "The Last Week," Marcus Borg and JD Crossan lift up the possibility that at the same time that Jesus was riding into Jerusalem in this peasant procession from the east, so too was Pontius Pilate riding in as a part of an imperial procession from the west. Two opposing forces rode into Jerusalem at the beginning of that Passover. One a force that represented military and imperial right that sought to enforce its will through violence and blood shed; the other a peaceable force that sought to bring about God's will through the work of peace making.

The clash that happens during Holy Week is a clash between these two forces in the world, a clash that continues to exist today. What was significant about Jesus' entrance was that it was not one that represented military victory or triumph, it represented a new way of living in relationship with God in the world. Jesus rode into Jerusalem in preparation for the Passover as a part of his continued work to bring good news of God's love and justice to the poor.

Throughout this last week of Jesus' life, this week that we now call Holy, Jesus' disciples were hopeful about change that they felt in the air. Jesus was showing the new way, a way that resisted violence and oppression. Jesus represented a voice that was fresh and new, that challenged the system and while that was exciting and inspiring for many, it was intimidating and threatening for others. Jesus represented a voice that, from

the perspective of those in power, needed to be silenced; a voice that ultimately was. Or at least so the authorities thought.

This week as we remember and celebrate Jesus' last week, this Holy Week, we mark another anniversary as well. Does anyone know what this Wednesday is the anniversary of? This year marks the fifth anniversary... This Wednesday, March 19<sup>th</sup>, is the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our invasion of Iraq.

Now, I realize that even mentioning the Iraq War is an automatic stumbling block for many of you. As soon as I mentioned it I imagine that most of you found yourself immediately preparing to process what I was going to say next through a filter to see whether or not I said the "right" things, the same things you believe and feel. And this is our natural human tendency, to want to see if others think and feel the same way that we do about what is going on in the world, especially when it comes to difficult and challenging issues.

Regardless of what opinions you hold about the war in Iraq, I think it is important that we lift up and remember an anniversary like this. For five years now men and women, husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters have been serving the United States. They deserve to be remembered in our thoughts and prayers.

And over these last five years some incredible numbers have been tallied, numbers that I think we need to be aware of as we confront the realities and violence of our world today in the midst of this Holy Week.

- As of Thursday, March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2008 at least 3,987 United States Citizens have been killed in Iraq.
- Nearly 30,000 more have been seriously wounded in their service. Each of these men and women deserve to be remembered.

- As of February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008 between 80,000 and 90,000 Iraqi Civilians have been killed due to violence in Iraq. These men and women deserve to be remembered.
- To date the war in Iraq has cost more than \$500 billion dollars.
- This cost equates to approximately \$4,100 per household.
- As of last Sunday, the cost of the war is expected to be \$12 billion dollars per month in 2008.

Nearly 2,000 years ago Jesus rode into Jerusalem proclaiming an alternative system to the one that was in place. Jesus rode into Jerusalem as a representative of a way of living that challenged systems of violence and war. Jesus rode into town amidst the crowds waving palm branches and chanting hosannas and we know what happened to him.

Craig T. Kocher, the Associate Dean of the chapel and director of religious life at Duke University challenges us during this Holy Week to, “focus on the peaceable kingdom in the midst of a bloody world.” Further he reminds us that, “While the blood and gore of Mel Gibson’s crucifixion scenes in *The Passion of the Christ* may be over the top, the movie highlights Jesus’ command to his disciples to ‘put away the sword.’ Jesus Christ does not counter violence with violence and does not allow his followers to either.”

Jesus Christ, the prince of peace, does not counter violence with violence and does not allow his followers to either. These are powerful words for us to hear as we prepare for this Holy Week. Why did Jesus ride into the city? It was as part of his work to bring about God’s kingdom. The greater question is one that we all have to wrestle with. How will we as individuals and a culture be transformed by this story, will we follow the example of Jesus or continue down the paths we’re currently traveling. The decision is ours to make.