

Palm Sunday
When Everything Falls Apart
Mark 15:1-15

Sometimes we talk as if the world has never been as dramatic as it is now. As though in our lifetimes, civilization has reached its absolute breaking point, and everything is about to be cast into utter darkness. Chaos. Certainly that's what you might think if you pick up a newspaper these days or watch the news about this election cycle in the United States. Life as we know it is about to end.

I wonder if it has always felt like that.

And of course, we read history only with hindsight. From this angle we see that even when there were terrible catastrophes, life *did* continue, that whatever the fears of that time were, many of them were unnecessary. But history only summarizes the stories of another time. We get to the end and we measure the net results. What changed. What remained mostly as it was. History doesn't usually capture the feeling of what it was to live through that time.

Part of what it means to place yourself within a tradition is that its history becomes personal; you feel it from the inside. It's not just someone else's story; it is yours. Your grandparents' story is *your* story. The memory of Jesus' death and resurrection is our story. So we stay with these events between the Palm Sunday parade and Easter morning. Stay with them until you can *feel* the difference between what really happened in that first holy week and the way it gets summarized 2,000 years later.

I'm pretty sure that first Palm Sunday parade wasn't orderly and dignified, the way we re-create it in church, with a rehearsed procession of well-trained choir members, personal-size palm leaves. It was more like a protest march. People milling around, talking, laughing, maybe shouting. Waiting for something to happen. What? They weren't sure; they only knew that Jesus was coming into the city, and something was about to change.

As much as anything, some people probably came out of curiosity. Who was this Jesus? What was he about to do next? He could do anything he wanted to, probably! And so the people gathered—excited, but also a little nervous, watchful. They were doing something that they knew could get them into trouble.

Both historians and Bible scholars tell us that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday was carefully planned to make a statement. Remember that Israel was an occupied territory; the Roman government kept a tight rein over the Jewish people because they were afraid that if they let up, there would be a political uprising. And so, as the Jewish Passover holiday was about to begin, an imperial procession—a military parade—approached Jerusalem from the east, to enter by the west gate of the city. It was intended to remind the Empire's subjects of who was in charge: the Roman army. It was led by generals who rode in on mighty horses that had come back from battle. No doubt they had their swords drawn for good effect. They would have

expected the common people to line the streets and watch this display of power with awe and obedience.

But on this day, the common people of Israel, the occupied territory, were on the other side of the city—because another procession was entering from the east. This parade wasn't led by generals in military uniforms, but by Jesus, who looked pretty much like the regular people who had gathered to meet him. He rode not on a steed, but on a donkey—the most common form of transportation available in those days. It would be like a parade today led by a 1998 Toyota Corolla. The contrast was startling, and you could see it immediately.

This procession planned by Jesus and his followers was a direct affront to the imperial Roman army. It was designed to look like a counter-demonstration, and it hit its mark. The people who lined the streets knew. They waved palm branches, which is what subjects of the Empire did when the emperor passed. They laid their cloaks on the ground, which is what the lower classes were required to do to keep the aristocracy from having to step in mud that ran in the streets.

And this procession of paupers made the point they intended. That the Roman Emperor, the one the law commanded them to call Savior of the people, and even Son of God, was not the only one who had claim to those titles. The people got it. They knew they were conspiring in what might be the beginning of a revolution. If it kept gathering strength; if this Jesus was as smart as he seemed; if he could gather this kind of crowd and inspire them as he seemed to be able to do...they just might be able to do it this time. They might actually push the Roman army out of their city. Their country.

This was the hope that was fed on that Palm Sunday. Jesus was their charismatic leader, the one who might rally the people and lead the Jews into the kind of revolution they had been waiting for a long time. Maybe he actually was a God-person, different from anyone other rebel leader who had come along. Maybe they should follow him. I know!, one person said. Let's make him our new king! And the message spread through the crowd—first whispered, then shouted. The new 'King of the Jews'.

But there was a lot they didn't understand about their candidate. They'd missed—or dismissed—some parts of his message, the parts about non-violence, about loving your enemies, about trusting God to make things right.

By Monday, it was like he threw the campaign into reverse gear. He seemed intent on turning his back on all the adoration the crowd was ready to grant him—power that he really could have leveraged into something! Instead of using it to his advantage, he seemed to squander it. Argue with the people whose business of changing money in the Temple had been going for the last 100 years? Dump their tables over and shout at them about not using God's house for the right purpose? Predict that the Temple would be destroyed? Not a good idea if you want people to like you.

And so this week that began with what looked like a triumphant build-up of momentum started to shift. The people's mass movement of civil and political rights suddenly began to go south on them. The candidate wasn't cooperating in their victory plan. And the people got angry. Of

course they did. That's what happens when our expectations get disappointed. We get angry. We blame someone.

They blamed Jesus. They took him to Pilate, the Roman governor, as if to send the message to Jesus, "You see what happens when you don't stay with your own people? When you go off-message and get out there on your own? We don't stay with you, either." So there Jesus stood in front of Pilate, accused of threatening rebellion. There were many people accused of threatening rebellion.

It was Passover, the most sacred holiday in the Jewish year. There were thousands of extra people in Jerusalem that weekend, and Pilate could see that the crowd needed to be pacified in some way, before something ugly broke out. And so he brought out to the angry crowd two men: Jesus, the non-violent healer and philosopher, and Barabbas, a man also accused of inciting rebellion—but with weapons. I'll release one of them today, Pilate announced. You choose.

You know what happened. You know who the crowd chose for release, and the one for whom they shouted, "Go ahead and crucify him."

But stop for a moment at a detail that I never paid attention to until the adult Sunday School class studied it a few weeks ago: Barabbas, the criminal that the people told Pilate to set free. His name is there in all four of the New Testament Gospels: *bar*, which in Hebrew means "son"; *Abbas*, which means "father". *Son of the Father* was the man who stood up next to the one who had called himself Son of Man. Barabbas wasn't just a random inmate; in the story of Jesus, the story of our tradition, Barabbas is a symbol.

There next to each other, with the power of the people on one side and the power of the Roman government on the other: Barabbas who will lead us with the energy of hatred and rage; or Jesus, who insists that change will come from attachment to a God whose power is love.

You chose the wrong person, Mark is telling his readers, telling us. You chose violence, the wrong way. Everything might have been different.

That hits me like a slap in the face. Does it feel like that to you too? We—I—still make the wrong choice, over and over again.

A story this week had a similar effect on me. This happened in Belfast, Ireland, although it could have happened anywhere, on any day. It was a regular weekday; people were walking around on the streets, buying what they needed, running their errands. A woman was pushing a stroller, and the two-year old child in it was squirming and making lots of complaining noises. The woman stopped, and walked around so she could see the child's face, and she screamed, loudly, "I f-ing hate you."

Life in the city continued. People kept on with their errands. They bought food, things to make their homes look good; they admired clothes in the store windows. But the second that hatred shot out of the woman's mouth, something shattered, broke irretrievably.

Padraig O'Tuama, the writer whose story this is, said,

*“The truth in this story is that we all have our breaking points, and when we break we say more about ourselves than about the one who is the victim of our breaking. I will fall and, in my falling, I will drag you with me, and I will drag you to my own hell with me. It is an awful truth, but it is a truth lived out in most—maybe every—human experience. Can we stop it? I don’t know, I don’t think so...”*¹

What happened for that mother and child when they went home? Maybe she held that child long enough to forgive herself, for love to be added to the terrible mix of what that two-year-old heard that day. Maybe it never happened again. Maybe.

This is a week for telling the truth. For acknowledging that we live in a world full of wrong choices, of brokenness, of things we let die, the relationships we kill, because of our disappointed expectations and resentment, and even hatred. This is a week for remembering that our God came to be with us in this broken, messed up life—not just to be worshiped, but to hold even the most terrible choices—from us, with us...for us.

¹ Padraig O'Tuama, *In the Shelter*, p. 96-97