

Pastor's Devotional for March 25, 2018

Read Luke 19:28-44

It's that time of year: time to ponder what we often take for granted. Holy Week is a great time to think deeply about the death of Christ...and how his death brings us life.

His crucifixion is hardly news, yet the story should shock us. Wearing a cross is the equivalent of wearing a miniature hangman's noose as jewelry—except that a cross is far more extreme. A hangman's noose brings a quick death. A cross prolongs agony and humiliates its stripped victims. Crosses were billboards that screamed "Don't mess with the authorities!"

So how can tortured death on a cross bring life? The first "Palm Sunday" provides clues. Jews who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem were exuberant, because his miracles were signs that Jesus was the Messiah (in Greek, the "Christ"). Hundreds of years previous, Zechariah prophesied that the Christ would enter Jerusalem in a unusual manner: "*See your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey*" (9:9). King David started this quaint tradition centuries before (Now athletes receive adulation waving from convertibles)!

Many would-be Messiah's entered Jerusalem in triumph. Each rallied a crowd to rebel against corrupt Jewish leaders and wicked pagan conquerors. But each false Messiah was defeated. Many were crucified. To the crowd, Jesus was a huge disappointment. He was arrested, mocked, and scourged. Appearing weak, Jesus seemed a charlatan. Those who had cheered him soon yelled "Crucify!" Jesus could have called down heavenly warriors, but his Father sent him to fight evil with non-violence, a strategy prophesied by Isaiah five hundred years before:

*Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.*
(Isaiah 53:4-5, the passage John Krehbiel read last Sunday)

God had far bigger plans than simply liberating Jews from Roman oppression. Jesus' death was a battle of cosmic proportions, to liberate everyone. The Messiah fought as a Suffering Servant. The Son of God's death on the cross unleashed God's love, the most powerful force in the universe. Paul portrayed Jesus' death as a divine ambush: "*having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross*" (Colossians 2:15). Jesus' death began Satan's undoing, for now the Dragon is "bound" (Revelation 20:2).

Hebrews 12:2 says *for the joy set before him, Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame*. Yet Luke 18:41 reports that when he "*saw the city, he wept over it.*" Most people (including religious people) would not follow his path, instead, most would choose the downward spiral of violence: "*If you, even you, had known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.*" Forty years later, the Roman Empire suppressed another revolt, but no mercy. After a long siege, the city walls fell, the population was killed or enslaved, and the Temple leveled.

Jesus wasn't vengeful to predict Jerusalem's destruction. His lament reminds us that fighting evil with violence doesn't defeat evil at all. Killing people who do evil may limit the damage that they can do. But the only way to go on the offense against evil is to embrace the power of sacrificial love, following our Suffering Servant Messiah, our risen Lord Jesus!

Questions to ponder or discuss:

- What would happen to us if God treated his enemies with violence? (If you doubt that we could be God's enemies, see Romans 5:10). But how does God treat His enemies?
- April 4 will be the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Why was non-violent resistance effective in changing hearts and advancing civil rights?
- What's small step could you take to fight an evil as a Christ-follower?