

Palm Sunday A (4/9/17)

Matthew 21:1-11

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalms 31:9-16

Philippians 2:5-11

Matthew 27:11-54

Prophecy is an art. Jesus' celebrated entry into Jerusalem is a deliberate spectacle, satirizing the ways of earthly kings by reclaiming a royal image from Israel's prophetic past. His demonstration, however, meets with crushing opposition. Jerusalem's political and religious authorities carry out a spectacle of their own, putting the prophet-king to death for all to see as a display of their destructive power. But God's creativity ultimately overcomes our violence, sweeping us up into the sacred, creative work of faith, hope, and love.

In the wake of the banking crisis of 2007-8, outrage broke out over the reckless lending practices that had caused so much harm to the economy, and especially to vulnerable people. Protests of various shapes and sizes arose, calling responsible parties to account for their role in the disaster. One such demonstration was especially memorable for its religious motivation and its reference to a famous Bible story. People of faith assembled outside the headquarters of a major bank in Manhattan and, calling out the company's transgressions, proceeded to march around the perimeter of the building seven times. Do you catch the reference? The protest was a symbolic reenactment of the Battle of Jericho from Joshua 6. At God's command, Joshua and the people of Israel circle the city of Jericho seven times, blow the trumpets, let out a loud shout, *and the walls come a-tumblin' down*. The

people's faithful action accomplishes God's purpose, delivering the seemingly impenetrable city into Israel's hands.

The demonstrators' allusion to this story evoked a powerful idea: If mighty Jericho was subject to God's will, then so are financial institutions. Regardless of any organization's apparent strength, the people of God, upheld by God's righteous word, need not be afraid to confront abusive power. It was a simple yet creative public statement, drawing on scriptural imagery to make a compelling case for financial justice.

Prophecy is an art. The prophet relies heavily on creative means of communication to speak God's truth to power. More specifically, in many cases biblical prophecy involves the use of symbolic gestures, or what interpreters call prophetic sign-actions, to make a point. For instance, God instructs the prophet Jeremiah to bring a clay jug with him to Jerusalem where he will speak a word of judgment against the kings and inhabitants for their idolatry and violence. "Then you shall break the jug in the sight of those who go with you," God commands, "and shall say to them: Thus says the LORD of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended."¹ It's a provocative public display, like the bank protest, intended to capture the people's attention and send a message. A dramatic element accompanies the divine word in order to amplify it.

¹ Jeremiah 19:10-11.

This is a helpful insight into the story of Jesus' celebrated entry into Jerusalem in our processional Gospel from Matthew today. Traditionally understood as the jubilant arrival of Israel's redeemer king, Jesus' donkey ride also falls under the category of prophetic sign-action. He has arranged the procession such that it fulfills an oracle of the prophet Zechariah: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."² In this way, **Jesus claims his authority over against the Roman and Judean establishment, yet his parade parodies what Jerusalem would normally expect from an imperial procession: no war horses, only a lowly pair of donkeys; no legion of soldiers and prisoners of war in tow, only peasants rejoicing and laying garments and branches on the road; no formal welcome from the local elite, only apprehension at the sight of such an unusual scene.**³

Thus, **Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is a deliberate spectacle, satirizing the ways of earthly kings by reclaiming a royal image from Israel's prophetic past.** And, this sign-action evokes a powerful idea: **His will not be a reign of tyranny, but a reign of peace; the true king has come not to lord his authority over others, but to exemplify humble service.**⁴

² Zechariah 9:9.

³ See Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 414-15.

⁴ Matthew 20:25-28.

As we know from the rest of the story, however, Jesus' demonstration meets with crushing opposition. Intolerant of any challenge to their power, Jerusalem's political and religious authorities carry out a spectacle of their own, putting the prophet-king to death for all to see. **If the procession into Jerusalem is an expression of holy creativity, the procession out to Golgotha is a manifestation of destructive power.** The crucifixion is emblematic of all the cruelty we inflict on each other, as we repeatedly undermine God's reign of peace. And, whenever the artist casts a vision of a different world, in our fear and self-involvement, we find a way to suppress it.

Nevertheless, God is perennially creative. Dear church, at the heart of the gospel is the most compelling sign-action of all. **In the shadow of the tomb, God performs resurrection, dramatizing the divine will that life should flourish in spite of death and despair.** And by this spectacle, God transforms us, overcoming our violence and sweeping us up into the sacred, creative work of faith, hope, and love.