

Palm/Passion Sunday
April 10, 2022
Southampton, MA

Scripture: Luke 19:28-40

The **New York Times** recently reported on right-wing political rallies fusing themselves to Christian worship and rituals.¹ The article noted that this intersection of religion and politics is not new. It has been a part of American culture for decades, including the civil rights movement. This intersection is not limited to the right. The mainline church, which would be considered the left, holds an Ecumenical Advocacy Day in Washington, DC every year for people of faith to lobby members of Congress.

While bringing politics into worship has been an ongoing issue, which often gets expressed as “I don’t want to hear politics when I come to church, I want to hear the Bible.” Typically, our response as clergy, which we say under our breath, “Jesus was political. It’s only politics if it doesn’t square with your understanding of scripture.” However, that’s another sermon for another day.

The newsworthy note here is political rallies fusing themselves to worship and religious ritual. Initially, this began as a reaction to lockdowns and mandates for face masks and vaccines. It has since broadened to include cultural issues such as opposition to Black Lives Matter, critical race theory, and abortion. It also embraces the belief that the 2020 election was stolen, and the January 6 storming of the Capitol was legitimate protest. Underlying all this is a belief that Christianity must save America from itself. The article quoted one pastor, “My understanding of

¹ Elizabeth Dias and Ruth Graham. *The Growing Religious Fervor in the American Right: ‘This is a Jesus Movement’* **The New York Times**. April 6, 2022 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/06/us/christian-right-wing-politics.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage§ion=US%20News> April 7, 2022 (Print edition)
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Jesus' kingdom is that he is Lord, not just over the church, but every aspect of society. That means family, education, arts, entertainment, business for sure, and government.”²

In one sense, he was correct. The kingdom of God is a world contrary to the ways of our world today. The kingdom of God is not just the place where we will go after we die. It is here in this world when we live fully into Jesus' teachings.

That was the point of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem days before the Passover, which we know as Palm Sunday. His joyous, triumphant entry into the city was a sign of hope for all the people who yearned for peace, which was not just the absence of violence. It was peace as in tranquility, well-being, and the wholeness of life. It was peace as their salvation from the bread of the Empire. Jesus' entry to Jerusalem was the confrontation between the kingdom of God and the Empire of Caesar. It was a confrontation between two visions of the world, peace maintained in love or peace maintained in fear. It was a confrontation between a world believing in Creation's abundance so no one would suffer deprivation, or a zero-sum world believing in scarcity, where people will go hungry as others feast sumptuously. It was a peace in which everyone would have their daily bread and the dignity of their humanity.

The shouts for peace as Jesus came down from the Mount of Olives echoed the angel's proclamation the night of his birth, “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favors.” (Luke 2:14) That proclamation was for a king, who now entered Jerusalem on the back of colt. For the people that morning, their king had arrived.

The kingdom of God will truly change all that we know. The Good News, which is the gospel, inverts the ways and values of this world. Wealth is what we can give away, not what we have. Leadership is servanthood. Peace comes from sharing the bread and the cup, not instruments of violence and destruction. Our strength comes from the common good, not

² Ibid.
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individual might. Humility is true power. Our freedom comes not just when we are free, but all are free.

Politics fused to worship and religious ritual is a potent combination. Rituals are necessary for us to transition from one state to another, such as a funeral that allows us to put our loved one in the past. Rituals help us to express emotionally what we cannot fully articulate verbally. Consequently, fusing rituals into a political rally can amplify anger and resentment. Furthermore, invoking God to the cause makes the cause righteous and implicitly just. Opposition becomes opposition to God and, depending upon their theology, may justify destroying those who oppose.

Let's acknowledge that widespread discontent centering on life today exists regardless of political identity or affiliation. The discontent could be political, cultural, economic, or sociological. We can point to excessive corporate power, broader ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity, rising awareness of non-binary sexuality, globalization, gross income inequality, consumerism, climate change, and technology as sources contributing to an overall feeling of societal instability. Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, described this as being exiled in your own land. He wrote, "exiles experienced a loss of the structured, reliable world which gave them meaning and coherence, and they found themselves in a context where their most treasured and trusted symbols of faith were mocked, trivialized, or dismissed."³ He went on to write, "Exile is an experience of moral incongruity. That is, the displacement and destructiveness of exile makes one aware that the terrible fate of displacement is more massive than can be explained in terms of moral symmetry."⁴

³ Walter Brueggemann. **Cadences of Home Preaching among Exiles**. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 1997. Page 2

⁴ Ibid. Page 9
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The past provides a reliable structure in a world that seems untethered. The right-wing rallies seek to re-establish a world which has meaning and coherence, and that desire should not be dismissed because their grief for what is gone is real.

However, the memories of that past gloss over the realities of racism, sexism, cultural differences, and sexual identity which were always underneath the surface. Over the past couple of decades, they have emerged and have become abundantly evident, which disrupted the reliable structure of the past. Furthermore, income inequality, corporate power, globalization, climate change, and technology have also emerged simultaneously to compound the obliteration of the markers which defined that reliable, structured world.

The confrontation that Sunday in Jerusalem sought to move everyone from the ways of the Empire to the ways of God's kingdom or the ways of death to the ways of eternal life. We will recover stability when don't call upon the government to preserve what we have, but fully embrace Jesus' teachings to affirm the common good, the dignity of all people regardless of race, gender, sexual identity, ethnicity, economic class, and physical and mental capability. Stability will come when we fully trust in kindness and compassion, accept humility's power, and embrace leadership as servanthood. Fundamentally, the kingdom God rests upon the proposition that a radically, inclusive love is the foundation for true peace and justice, and thus, a truly stable and reliable world.

Accepting that proposition means accepting vulnerability and uncertainty, which we can surmount with imagination, courage, and trust in God's abiding presence.

That's the proclamation Jesus made that morning when he entered Jerusalem. He accepted his burden to die on cross in love for all those in Jerusalem that day, for all those in Ancient Israel, and for all humankind henceforth from that day. By his death, he showed us that

love has the power to transform the cross from a symbol of humiliation to a symbol of hope. By dying, he showed us how to live and that life will always triumph over death. Dying on the cross means our salvation, not just after we die, but more importantly, today in this world, thereby making real the words we say every week, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

The traps and snares on the road to the cross come from the yearnings for that stable, reliable structured past. Jesus had faith that whatever was ahead of him would be better than the Empire’s bread. Implicitly, going to the cross with Jesus means to trust Jesus’ teachings and eschew a nostalgic past that was more mythical than real for the blessings of true peace and justice grounded in a radically inclusive vision of love. That’s God’s bread.

Let us not falter in the days ahead as we walk the last steps with Jesus. Let us not falter for the bread of heaven awaits.