

“Strutting, Crowing, Rooster Religion meets Jesus”

(a Palm Sunday sermon based upon Luke 19:28-41, page 83, and 22:28-34, page 87)

by

Rev. Dr. Paul A. Lance, Pastor
Seaside Community Church (United Church of Christ)
22940 Ocean Ave., Torrance, California 90505

March 16, 2008

Today is one of the happiest days of the Church year, the day of the great green parade (Palm Sunday) when the Christian Church the world over re-enacts the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. We just read the story from Luke’s Gospel... how the great crowd, which had gathered for the Passover festival, went out to meet Jesus, shouting:

*“Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord.
Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest!”*

That seems to be a straight-forward statement of **Lordship** (**Messiahship**) declaring Jesus as Israel’s **king**. And it’s done in public, for all to see. You will notice that some Pharisees in the crowd complained: *“Teacher (Rabbi), order your disciples to stop!”* To which Jesus replied, *“I tell you, if these were silenced, the stones themselves would cry out!”* In other words, this procession **will** go forward -- against all opposition, if needs be.

With the children, I referred to those Pharisees as “puffed-up & proud” like roosters. *They thought they owned the Temple*; they ran the show. It was their religion, and they could **strut & crow** all they liked. But not Jesus!

This parade fulfilled Scripture and it pleased God. *They could try to scare away the crowds (and silence the people), but they can’t stop God!* The very stones underfoot (the stones in the massive building walls) provide testimony & witness to the long-awaited Messiah’s arrival. *It’s happening!* And *you can’t stop it*. You civic leaders! You can cackle and crow, puff yourselves up and strut your stuff, but *it’s all coming down* around you!

We talked about this story a few weeks ago, considering the role of *the donkey*! Since Jesus chose to ride on a donkey – a colt that had never been ridden – we are reminded of the *coronation* parade for *King Solomon* (1,000 years earlier). The point is... no one in Jerusalem would have missed the symbolic meaning of this event. *The new king*, who would take the throne of David & who would rule as the Anointed/Messiah, was coming into town.

And it was happening during the “Passover” season, which was the annual celebration of *Moses’ victory over King Pharaoh* (2,000 years earlier) “Passover” is the commemoration of those heady days in which the slaves of Egypt were *set free*... It’s the remembrance of the 40-day period on *Mount Sinai* in which Moses received the *Torah* (the 10 Commandments) and it recalled the start of the *40 years of wandering* it took the people of Israel to return to their *Promised Land*: Palestine. (We’ll talk more about the Passover and Day of Atonement later this week on Maundy Thursday at 7:30 PM.)

This public ceremony has just placed Jesus into that stream of history: as the people declared *him* to be God’s *New Moses*... Jesus, the Messiah, the long-promised (and now *anointed*) King of Israel! Palm Sunday says, in no uncertain terms, that *God has heard the cry* of the people for *liberation* once more, and (therefore) *Jesus “Messiah”* is being crowned as Israel’s King!

But something unexpected happened at that moment: in the middle of the parade, Jesus wept!

As he came near and saw the city, Jesus wept over it, saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But they are hidden from your eyes.” (Luke 20:41-42)

We talked about Jesus’ lament over the city a few weeks ago, when we heard Jesus say: “*Jerusalem! Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing! ... I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say: Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.*” (Luke 13:33-35)

Well, today we heard those very words! Jesus was greeted on Palm Sunday with the Hosannas & Hallelujahs of the crowd (the king-makers) who shout: “*Blessed is the **king** who comes in the name of the Lord.*”

On Palm Sunday the crowd proclaimed Jesus *KING!* Marched with him into the Temple... expecting a confirmation & coronation... *but nothing happens!* (?) Jesus rides into town on his humble donkey colt; he cries a little when he sees Jerusalem; he enters the Temple and causes a bit of a stir among the merchants, but then he just *left* again *without changing a thing*. For the rest of the week, nothing changed! Luke tells us that “every day he was teaching in the Temple. The chief priests, the scribes, & the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him, but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.” (Luke 19:47-48)

Can you imagine the disappointment?

The religious people had been led to believe that the Messiah would *set right* all that was wrong with the world. Jesus instead had showed them what they could do to bring it about, but *that's* not what they wanted! *He* was *supposed* to *do it on his own*, to prove that he was (indeed) the Messiah!

Had the prophets not *promised* that Messiah would *swallow up death* forever, and *wipe away* the tears from all their faces? Well... Here comes Jesus, riding into Jerusalem, but instead of *consoling* them (vindicating them & proving his divinity) Jesus starts crying himself! Tears streak Jesus' face!

You may recall the question John the Baptist asked while he was in prison, waiting for Jesus to take *decisive “Messiah-like” action*: “Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for someone else!?” (Matthew 11:3) You see, Jesus didn't fit the bill! That question (from the very *first Baptist*, nonetheless) captured the ambivalence & uncertainty that swirled around Jesus.

We know that Jesus turned away from *the temptation to power* back in the wilderness at the very start of his ministry. He was *not* going to undercut *love* by grasping for kingly power. Not then, not now.

In fact, I'll bet that if Jesus had simply *avoided* using the metaphor of **Kingdom** (when speaking of the Realm of God) everything might have been different. You see, **kingdom** was an emotionally charged word in his day. As soon as he said it, *images* sprang to life in the minds of his followers: armies, banners and trumpets, golden crowns and glittering swords, ivory and royalty -- a nation restored to grandeur, as was the glorious **Empire of King Solomon** long ago. A kingdom all puffed-up, proud, colorful: "rooster-like."

That's what this Palm Sunday triumphal procession had been intended to initiate: for the word "kingdom" meant *one thing* to the crowd ("power and glory forever!"), and something entirely *different* to Jesus. **Who ever heard of a HUMBLE king, for goodness sake!?** Who wants a *donkey-like mother-hen Jesus* when you expect *an avenging angel, a strutting rooster!*

But Jesus was more concerned about restoring right *relationships*, than about having power. He wanted religion to be based on *grace & faith*, not obedience. He wanted love, *friendship*, followers... not subjects! He wanted to gather the people under his wing, like a *mother hen* giving security and warmth to her chicks, not like a strutting... pompous... *crowing rooster*.

Jesus wanted, above all, for *forgiveness* to break the power of Evil, for that alone would *set people free* in their *spirits*. He wanted people to make peace, not more war; to *reconcile* & move on. There had been enough cock-fighting in the world's history! Jesus' emphasis on *changing people's hearts and minds* confused the crowds, who were looking for God to intervene with power that would change their political situation.

The ordinary person *didn't care* about some invisible (inner-psyche) or interpersonal (relational) "*kingdom of heaven*." They wanted *practical* solutions to *real* problems in their world: an end to poverty, sickness, abuse. For this, they needed *dramatic* divine *power*. They were crying out for *divine intervention*, not for an increase in mutual understanding. *Act, Jesus! Act!*

In the end, Jesus failed to measure up to the people's expectations of a *real* Messiah/warrior-king.

Nobody wanted a *“donkey-like” Church*; they wanted a war horse, a stallion! They didn’t want a *“mother hen” Messiah*; they wanted a fighting cock; a loud, bold, crowing rooster.

So, *it should come as no surprise* that (in the course of the week, when nothing “Messiah-like” happened from Jesus), *the very same people* who *praise* him today, *will turn on him*. That’s the sad story of Holy Week.

What was *not* expected was that *his own followers* – his *disciples* – would turn against him. There is nothing in the story of Jesus’ life thus far to indicate the utter failure, betrayal, and denial which was about to come.

Sure, his disciples knew that he had enemies... but *Jesus was on a roll!* Jesus was invincible! Surely God’s Messiah would triumph over all his enemies! **Hence, on to Jerusalem!**

Along the journey to Jerusalem, Jesus had said that the people would reject him (*kill him*) just as they had the *other* prophets God had sent to them. But the disciples dismissed the very possibility. Then, to their astonishment and dismay, things actually started coming apart!

First, Jesus acted so strangely during his Palm Sunday coronation parade -- actually weeping, *crying*, saying *the City didn't know how to make peace* (Luke 19:41-42) -- and it still doesn’t!

Then, even more strangely, was the way Jesus acted at their last Seder Supper together, *as if he would never see them again* -- saying that his body would be broken; his blood, shed. *These men & women disciples would be scattered*, he said, *like a flock without a shepherd*. By one of them he would be **betrayed!** *All* of them would be **afraid...** So he said...

Peter had replied: *No way! He'd be there, even if it meant dying at Jesus' side!* (Luke 22:33) What happened after that was too horrible to think about. *Peter still wept silently* whenever he thought of the three times he denied knowing Jesus!

The story is told in Luke 22:54-62 (page 87 in the pew Bible):

They seized Jesus and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them.

Then a servant girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said: "This man also was with him."

But he denied it, saying: "*Woman, I do not know him.*"

A little later someone else, on seeing him, said: "You also are one of them."

But Peter said, "*Man, I am not!*"

Then about an hour later still another kept insisting: "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean."

But Peter said, "*Man, I do not know what you are talking about!*"

At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him: "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

Peter's *intentions* were good, when he followed Jesus, but he made a bad decision when it came time for him to speak up. Peter's actions that night (his three denials) only added to his grief and guilt.

The full story of Jesus' arrest on Thursday night we will hear again at the special Maundy Thursday choir & communion service (this week at 7:30). Jesus was put on trial by the religious authorities as a *false* "Messiah" and *Peter was there*, in the courtyard, watching. Jesus was condemned by the Romans as a *false* "King of the Jews." The soldiers mocked Jesus by dressing him in a royal robe, bowing their knees before him, and then *crowning him with a wreath of thorns*. He was bloodied with a beating; and then he was lifted up on a cruel cross to die. So, when the visible realm of Roman *power* met the invisible kingdom of God's *heaven*, it seemed to *snuff it out*.

Whenever *Peter's mind's eye went back*, replaying the scene of three crosses on Golgotha, those three days of bleakness as Jesus' body lay buried... it was too painful!

And then Judas, one of the Twelve disciples, was found hung to death. By Friday, *Jesus* was dead; *Judas* was *dead*. The other eleven disciples, and the women, began to *split up*. Seven of the men decided to return home to Galilee, two disciples took off on the road to Emmaus; others huddled in Jerusalem in fear, behind locked doors.

Three years earlier, they had begun the Jesus' movement in Galilee with such high hopes, and now -- looking back on those dreams and their solemn vows -- Peter could see *how far they were from accomplishing any of them*.

Peter and the others had given up their jobs (their places in society) to follow a dream of "changing the world" for the better -- changing it for all eternity, for God! -- but *changing religious things* turned out to be *so much more difficult* than they had expected! Now that the Palm Sunday parade had passed, and Jesus had refused the Throne of David, had made so little of an effort to fight the Romans, the week came to an end with everything at a low point ... everything was so much *less* than they *thought* they *ought* to be.

It's normal for a person to make mistakes, and some of them can be quite serious. Peter's fear and failure should come as no surprise. *We're all a little like that*, when push comes to shove, especially when danger looms!

What does it take to *forgive ourselves* for our mistakes? Is there anything we can do *to get unstuck* when we are depressed, when we feel like fools or failures? I imagine that Peter, having heard *the crowing of the rooster*, realizing the fact of his denials, weeping his bitter tears, wondered those same things.

I suppose Peter and the disciples were experiencing the kind of *sad mood* one might encounter in the campaign headquarters of a losing candidate, or the *depressed quiet* one might hear in the locker room of a losing team. What was there to say? What could he do? It's *too late* now.

What could any of them do? The damage had already been done.

I wonder whether Peter could even have shared his “guilty little secret” with the others? *What would they think*, if they knew that (like *a fool...* all puffed-up & proud, so “cock-sure” of himself and his brave words) Peter had followed Jesus, but then (like a coward) when questioned, *he denied* knowing him, denied following him -- *three times!* They probably thought that his bitter tears were shed for *Jesus*, for their mutual *loss*, for the *injustice* of it all.

Those denials *felt* to Peter just like *Judas' betrayal* all over again... but this time *in him!* Maybe his guilt was even worse... for it was not just *one act* -- one *kiss of betrayal* -- but *three times!* Peter couldn't stand to think of what he had done, *but he couldn't get loose from it*, either. Hence, the tears.

I'm sure we all know how that feels. Maybe, not so much the feeling of *having failed* -- (after all, anyone who tries *anything* for a *first time* probably knows what it's like *to fail* on some occasions). All of us have plenty of mistakes behind us and there will be some bad decisions in *every* lifetime!

It's more than just a mistake. Peter's denials feel like *betrayal*. Not just *dashed hopes*, but gnawing guilt! *Disappointment with others* when they let us down is hard enough to take, but *denying in ourselves* that which we know to be true -- knowing we are living so much less (so much lower) than we *ought* to be -- can drive a person crazy!

And now that the rooster has crowed, and Peter *knows* what he has done, what was there to do? What was there to say?

If something really powerful didn't intervene, and quickly, Peter's *depression...* the disciples lack of direction... their inability to find the energy to deal with their pain (their grief!) in the absence of Jesus, *the silence of God* would be their legacy to the world. Their dreams for “change” had been betrayed; the “rooster religion” in all its power *won!* They had failed.

It looked like the “Jesus movement” was *dead*.

And it was... but *only for a time*.

I invite you to come back not only on Thursday night, to share Jesus' Last Supper, but be sure to come back next Sunday... because ***Jesus does!*** And it is this "***second coming***" of ***Jesus***, when he returns as the ***Resurrected Christ*** (the glorious "Easter" event), that not only ***vindicated*** his Way as being God's Way, but also ***restored*** his followers' faith. The cocky "rooster" religion is brought down, after all; God's love and grace triumphs in the end.

Yes, Palm Sunday is the day of the great green parade – the coronation of Jesus as the Christ – but we now know it was thrown for ***the wrong kind of king!*** Because people held ***false ideas*** of how the Messiah would save the world: relying on coercion, enforcement of Law, and threats of violent power. ***Jesus came to set things right & to make peace.*** That's still his way.

The Christian movement recovered, after Easter; and Peter was restored to its leadership, but with a new humility and reality. The rooster stopped being a symbol of strutting strength and puffed-up pride, so "cocky" and colorful and bossy and bold. It became, instead, ***the Church's symbol of facing one's inner self*** and admitting the ***reality*** of failure, sin, and fear.

*"The rooster crows, reminding me of
Who I am and what I believe.*

Hello, rooster!

You know me inside:

Faces I wear and love that I hide."

(words & music by Yohann Anderson, 1979)