

It is a week before the Passover. The faithful are arriving in Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast in the holy city. Millions will crowd into this enclosed city of David in the coming days. The Romans have already sent extra troops to be on guard and prevent any uprisings. They especially are keeping an eye on what is happening in the Temple courtyards. The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate will soon be arriving with his escort coming into the city of David with all the pomp and military might of the Roman Empire.

Jesus and his disciples are approaching Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, the opposite side of the city from where Pontius Pilate will be entering the city with his entourage. As he has done before Jesus sends two of his disciples into a nearby village, Bethany, to get a donkey for him to ride. They bring the colt to him and he rides the donkey down from the Mount of Olives into the city. The words of the Prophet Zechariah may be coming to those whose are walking with him into Jerusalem. *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.* (Zech. 9:9) As they enter the gate of the city the pilgrims within hear that Jesus, the one who has been healing people, fed the multitudes and preaching in their synagogues is here! He is riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, the symbol of the Prince of Peace. They gather around the gate in eager anticipation to catch a glimpse of this Jesus from Galilee. Some have brought palm branches from the countryside to lay on the cobble road into the city to cushion his ride as they would for a Roman procession. Maybe that is why they have the palm branches already! Maybe they were going to line the street to see the Roman governor arrive, but then they heard that this Jewish rabbi is coming and they rushed to the other gate to see him! The words of the prophet Zechariah echo in their ears! Perhaps this Passover the prophesy will be fulfilled, as at that first Passover when God overcame the powers of Egypt and the Israelites passed through the Sea and began their journey to the Promised Land. Perhaps the end times are at hand and the rest of Zechariah's prophesy will be fulfilled: *He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.* (Zech. 9:10) So the people gather to welcome the one who comes riding into the city from the Mount of Olives where the Messiah who will free Jerusalem is expected to come from. They are welcoming a King, the one who will liberate them from Roman oppression! The one who will bring back the glory of the kingdom of David! The people cry: *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!*

They are proclaiming the military might of their ancestors, who fought with David as their king to establish Jerusalem as the center of Israel. They will be part of making Israel great again!

But this is Jesus and he is mocking what the crowds expect. He is not coming as a new king to overthrow with military might the powers of Rome. He is coming with the peace of God that those lining the streets don't understand. Yes, he will overcome all the violence and hatred that those who feel betrayed and threatened by his message and his very being inflect on him, but first he will be betrayed, tortured and die as a traitor to the state. The kingdom that Jesus brings into being is one that the world cannot understand. It

is not about military might, wealth or political power. It is about the love of God manifested in the world through serving those who have no power, healing the sick and restoring broken relationships. The kingdom of God does not bring material wealth or physical safety. It brings transformed lives that shine forth to care for others and stand against the powers of the world that seek to destroy others for their own gain and prestige.

The crowds welcome Jesus as the successor to the throne of David, not understanding that the kingdom that Jesus has inaugurated bears little resemblance to that earthly kingdom. We wonder how the crowds could have turned on Jesus, yelling, “crucify him” before Pilate. But he didn’t live into their expectations of the Messiah, he didn’t raise an army, as Judas wanted him to do and fight the Romans. The people wanted the glory of David’s kingdom, and Jesus did not meet their expectations of him. He was arrested and brought to trial for disturbing the status quo. He threatened the religious and worldly powers of the day. Just as his followers are to do in our own day. If we truly have transformed lives through our relationship with Jesus then the world will see God’s love manifested through us, and it can threaten the powers of this world.

Those who experienced the healing presence of Jesus followed his teachings and told others how their lives were transformed. That is what we are called to do as well. Connecting with social justice issues is part of our ministry as a church. As we move forward this year with the Vitalization Cohort Project we will be asked to connect with the community around our church by asking our neighbors, how can we help you? How can we address what our community needs so that people’s lives are transformed? The Food Pantry and serving as a COVID testing site have been two ways that we have helped our neighbors during the pandemic.

As Jesus walked the roads he didn’t heal everyone, but he ‘saw’ people and listened to them. He heard their needs and what held them back from being the person they were created to be. He worked against systems that sought to strip away the dignity of individuals. He called little children to come to him, when they were seen as property to be ignored or used. He empowered women throughout his ministry, treating them as equals to his male disciples as he taught and stayed in local homes. He had dinner with a tax collector whom people despised for corrupt practices. He affirmed people as the beloved of God.

The day after he entered Jerusalem to the cheers of the crowd he entered the Temple courts and over turned the moneychangers tables, almost creating a riot! He threatened the working of the religious institution of his day. He railed against the purity codes that created an “us and them” mentality. He raised up the lowly and the powerful killed him!

Preaching the gospel is threatening to those in power. Respecting the dignity of every human being means that lives will be transformed. Resisting evil and striving for justice and peace among all people is the task that the Risen Christ has given us! May we in our time have the courage to persevere in the power of the Holy Spirit to manifest God’s love in our neighborhood.