

"Blessed Alternatives" // Palm Sunday // March 25, 2018
Joe Heikman // Wildwood Mennonite Church

A reading from John 12:12-16, juxtaposed with Matthew 5:3-10

The next day, the great crowd that had come for the Passover feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, so they got palm branches and went out to meet him. They shouted joyfully, "Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of our God! Blessed is the ruler of Israel!"

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for their is the kingdom of heaven."

"Blessed is the ruler of Israel!"

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted"

"Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

"Blessed is the ruler of Israel!"

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled"

"Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy"

"Blessed is the ruler of Israel!"

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

"Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

"Blessed is the ruler of Israel!"

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for their is the kingdom of heaven."

"Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me."

"Blessed is the king of Israel!"

"Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

"Hosanna!"

Jesus rode into the city sitting on a donkey, in accord with scripture: "Fear not, O people of Zion! Your ruler comes to you sitting on a donkey's colt." At the time, the disciples didn't understand all this, but after Jesus was glorified they recalled that the people had done to him precisely what had been written about him.

Remember that campaign where the political outsider marched on the capital, a self-proclaimed savior saying outrageous things, so outrageous that crowds of people would show up at his campaign events, whether they agreed with him or not, just to see what crazy thing he might say next? Many of the common folk loved him, because he railed against the educated elite, he said the whole system was rigged, that his opponents were corrupt hypocrites.

And so his opponents fought back, laughing at him for hanging out with the deplorables. But even though all the talking heads had written off his chances, he kept insisting that his victory was inevitable, that he had already started a revolution, that he was the only one that could save the world.

And then at the climax of the campaign, it looked like he had lost. By almost every way of keeping score, he did lose.

Except that by some great mystery, he really did win. At least, that's what his followers insisted, that he won against all the odds, the greatest victory in the history of victories. And they insisted on a set of alternative facts that justified his victory and would define a new world order.

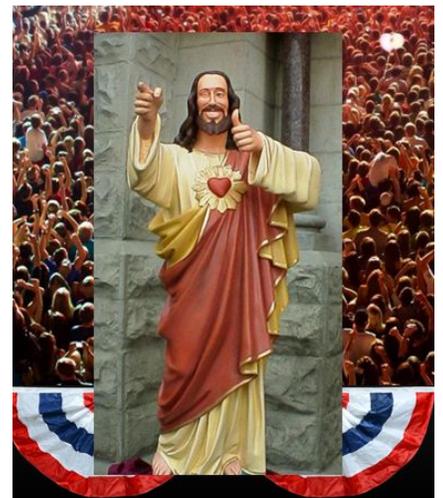
Of course I'm talking about... Jesus of Nazareth.

Welcome to Palm Sunday, where everything you think you know, you don't really know.

To me, this is the most bizarre Sunday of the Christian calendar. It feels like we're celebrating before the game is played, singing all of these "Hosannas" when we know that the struggle of Holy Week is still to come.

And the whole story is about an exercise in missing the point: the Palm Sunday crowds thought this was an inauguration, a holy military parade, that Messiah was coming to overthrow the oppressor, drain the swamp, Make Israel Great Again. And that's not at all what Jesus was about, at least, not in the way they wanted him to be. And so I wonder, as Christians re-enact the Triumphal Entry with our victory songs and waving palms, are we making the same mistakes as well? Do we understand and appreciate that this victory, this salvation, is not the happily-ever-after fairy tale some of us would like it to be?

Maybe this should more accurately be called, "Be Careful What You Wish For" Sunday. Hosanna, question mark? Don't forget that the way of Jesus is actually the Way of the Cross. God's salvation does not free us from our mortality, and actually invites us to into suffering and death, not away from it.



The Lesson of Palm Sunday is straightforward. Many of the people that claimed Jesus as their Messiah, were ultimately disappointed because his revolution was not the overthrow of Rome that they were hoping for. The victory parade did little to change the situation on the ground--the Romans still ruled, the priests still judged, and Jesus never gave the call to arms. And so, the story goes, the cries of Hosanna on this day turned to shouts of "Crucify him!" by the end of the week.

Palm Sunday reminds us that Jesus was an unconventional Messiah, leading an alternative Way that challenged the traditional norms in his time.

And so the question is, what does it mean for us to live in alternative ways, now? Do we allow Jesus to challenge our expectations and assumptions, and how do we follow his example in offering alternative ways of understanding to our modern world?

That word is a loaded word these days.

There is the now-familiar phrase, "alternative facts," first used to describe two very different descriptions of the size of a crowd. It has come to symbolize the erosion of political discourse, to the point where how one feels about a topic is enough to override any objective, verifiable truth. Pre-determined opinions drive the interpretation of the facts of a situation, so that facts that don't support my argument are easily discarded as fake news.

Tell me which side you're on--left or right, guilty or innocent, pro-life or pro-choice, inclusive or traditional, Alt-Right or Black Lives Matter--and then I'll decide whether to accept your version of the story or not.

al·ter·na·tive

/ôl' tərnədīv/ ↻

adjective

adjective: **alternative**

- (of one or more things) available as another possibility.
"the various alternative methods for resolving disputes"
synonyms: **different, other, another, second, possible, substitute, replacement, alternate;** [More](#)
- (of two things) mutually exclusive.
"the facts fit two alternative scenarios"
- relating to behavior that is considered unconventional and is often seen as a challenge to traditional norms.
"an alternative lifestyle"
synonyms: **unorthodox, unconventional, nonstandard, unusual, uncommon,** out of the ordinary, radical, revolutionary, nonconformist, avant-garde; [More](#)

noun

noun: **alternative;** plural noun: **alternatives**

- one of two or more available possibilities.
"audiocassettes are an interesting **alternative to reading**"
synonyms: **option, choice,** other possibility; [More](#)

"We are living in an increasingly polarized society"

~ Every Opinion Piece in Every Media Outlet, 2017-2018



At least, that's the picture painted on the internet and in the media these days, that we are polarized along those black-and-white, for-or-against, conservative-vs-progressive binary lines. And that the traditional democratic principles of dialogue and compromise are being lost, replaced by party politics, both sides digging in and refusing to give an inch for fear the other side will turn that inch into a mile and all will be lost.

I can't say if that's the reality or not, but my facebook friends all agree that it is. ;)

Of course we're not the only culture to experience extreme polarization and binary thinking. In Galatians 3:28, Paul famously lays out three pairs:

Galations 3:28

*"There is neither Jew nor Gentile,
neither slave nor free,
nor is there male and female,
for you are all one in Christ Jesus. "*

Those were important categories in the ancient world, and there goes Paul, breaking them down: "you are all One in Christ Jesus."

This is an alternative way of thinking, breaking down black-and-white binaries with non-dualism, unity. Paul exposes the choice between the two sides as false, fading into the background in light of the most important thing, faith in the unifying Christ. The labels don't matter as much as the substance, and the substance is common humanity in the way of Jesus.

Paul does this, because Jesus does this. Rather than choosing sides and declaring victors, most of the time, Jesus offers alternatives. And so again, to follow Jesus is to accept the invitation to think differently, to intentionally seek out different ways of understanding and living.

A couple of examples of what this looks like.

First, one alternative to polarized thinking is simply to look for and live in expectation of a third option.

As John chapter 12 highlights, Jesus chose to ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey colt. In those days, as many of you have heard before, when a king approached an foreign city, his choice of ride was quite significant. If he came riding a horse, that meant war--he's ready to fight to conquer the city. But if he came seeking peace, he'd ride a donkey, as a symbol that he was seeking partnership, economic alliance, something other than the destruction of the city.

So, Jesus comes in on a donkey, which means peace. But that's not what the crowds wanted--they were crying "Hosanna! God save us! Blessed is the King of Israel!" Those are fighting words, when there is already a king over Jerusalem, already an Empire that claimed to be keeping the peace.

Palm Sunday? An Alternative View

1. Look for Third Way opportunities.



The crowd is crying for revolution, and Jesus seems to be accepting and encouraging those claims. Except that he's riding a donkey. He's proclaiming a peace which he has not fought for. He's claiming a crown that he has not earned. He's not against the revolution, he fully intends to answer the call of Hosanna. But he's not against the Romans, either, not the way they want him to be. He's offering a third way, one that not even the disciples understood until after the fact.

I like how Richard Rohr explains it:

“Every one of us has a certain resistance to a ternary [three-way] map because our whole lives have been formed by binary oppositions. We think in that way...I call it the “dualistic mind.” Most people fight back and forth between either/or binaries--just look at our political parties. The one with the loudest voice appears to win, but then you go away dissatisfied, feeling you have been cheated. And you have been.

...[my community] tries to practice what we call Third Way approaches to conflict, problem-solving, and creativity. You almost have to let “the two” fail you. You almost have to die to them. You almost have to be willing to be disappointed in both of them.... The gospel itself is neither liberal nor conservative but severely critiques both sides of this false choice.”

~ Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance*

Well, that's not going to play very well at the polls! :) Rohr calls this “the principle of three.” Where two sides are easily arranged in opposition, adding a third invites creativity, balance, a way out of the stuck-ness.

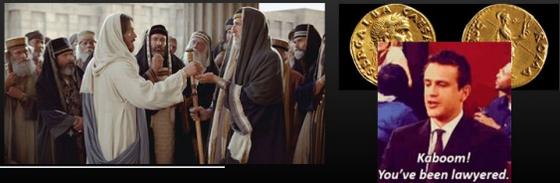
So that's one alternative way of thinking like Jesus, to reject the premise that one side has all the answers and the other has none, to instead open up to creativity and possibility.

A second way of alternative thinking is making space for subtlety, nuance and context. One of the things that drove the Jewish priests crazy about Jesus was that he was so hard to pin down. They'd come to him with a simple question, should Jews pay taxes to Rome or not? And instead of answering, he showed them a coin with Caesar's image on it, and then said “give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's!”

Which is not an answer, but rather a critique of the question. It's not a binary choice between God and

Palm Sunday? An Alternative View

1. Look for Third Way opportunities.
2. Make space for nuance and context.



Caesar: everything belongs to God, even Caesar. So there's room for more than one approach, and the polarization misses the point entirely.

Jesus did that all the time, answering questions with folktales and metaphors. To people wondering about eternal life, Jesus gives, by my count, seven different answers to different groups. He even admits to his disciples that he's intentionally trying to hide the truth from some people who he thought were not ready to hear it. If you're looking for a simple answer, you were always going to miss Jesus' point entirely.

Which is my favourite part of this Triumphal Entry story in John's gospel - the disciples totally missed what Jesus was doing with the donkey symbol. They didn't understand until later. And they thought that was important enough to admit and rather than trying to hide it, they included their ignorance in John's gospel. This is not simple stuff. This takes work to understand and put in proper context, because it's deep and rich.

That depth and subtlety is not appreciated very well in our present situation. Some of you probably heard the controversy a couple of weeks ago around NDP party leader Jagmeet Singh and the idea of Sikh separatism from the nation of India. Now, I didn't follow the story closely and know very little about the issues involved in Sikh separatism.

What was interesting to me is how upset some people got that Jagmeet Singh would not give them the straight answers they were looking for. The media coverage I heard was mostly about what Singh was trying to hide, or why he wouldn't want to tell people what his positions really are. One quote I remember is a news panel participant who insisted that "as the leader of a national political party, Singh needs to learn that he doesn't have the luxury of nuanced opinions."

I don't know about you, but I want my leaders to have deeply nuanced opinions, based on a broad understanding of history and context. Is it really a bad thing for a leader to hold to the idea that a conflict about 80 years old can't be boiled down to a single "for or against" statement? Is it possible that there are multiple factors to consider, and those things might change from one situation to the next, and that it might even be appropriate to respond differently based on who is listening? (Again, I'm not very aware of the issues at stake in this story and I really don't know if Singh is being nuanced or simply evasive; this isn't an endorsement, just a commentary on the value of an appreciation of nuance and context in leadership.)

It reminds me of some of the church assemblies I've been part of, when delegates are often reminded in discussion times to begin their comments by telling whether they are speaking for or against whatever motion is up for discussion. Which of course, puts everyone on the defensive right away--how can I trust you when I force you to choose a side right up front, to say whether you're with me or against me? And what better way to hamstring any possibility of creative problem-solving or even compromise than insisting that taking sides is a prerequisite for participating in the discussion?

Instead of straight answers, once-and-for-all-time proclamations, Jesus told stories, asked questions, offered cryptic *koans*. He listened to people. He danced with them, treated each situation and crowd on its own terms. Is that inconsistency and hypocrisy? Or is that wisdom?

One more example of Jesus' alternative wisdom. In some cases, Jesus did choose sides and declare winners and losers. But when he did, he chose not the strongest but the weakest.

Palm Sunday? An Alternative View

1. Look for Third Way opportunities.
2. Make space for nuance and context.
3. Embrace the Losers.



Some of you have heard me talk about Christian writer and podcaster Mike McHargue. He does a podcast called "[Ask Science Mike](#)," which is kind of a joke because he's not actually a scientist. But he's really smart and pragmatic and loves doing research, so online he's known as "Science Mike" and his podcast usually features him given research-based answers to questions people send in about science and faith. He takes a highly skeptical and rationale view of life, and his life story is about his journey from a Southern Baptist faith, to atheism, and then back to Christianity.

A recent episode of "Ask Science Mike" features a conversation between Mike and [Bart Campolo](#). Some of you know the evangelical preacher and sociologist Tony Campolo--this is Tony's son. Bart grew up as a Christian, and for a long time was part of his dad's work, especially in serving impoverished neighbourhoods as a social justice activist. After 30 years of Christian ministry, Bart announced that he no longer believes in God. And now he is dedicated to doing much of the same good work, but from a secular, humanist perspective, and he works as a "community builder, counselor, and humanist chaplain at the University of Cincinnati."

We're going to listen to a piece of the conversation between Bart Campolo, who left the Christian faith, and Mike McHargue, who has stubbornly clung to his Christian identity. We'll join towards the end of a long conversation about the values of equality and altruism in our modern society.

They're talking about how society should treat those who contribute less to society than others. Way back in tribal history, if someone broke their ankle and wasn't able to contribute, they would be left behind because the tribe couldn't afford to care for them until they recovered. But, Mike and Bart agree, modern society has plenty of resources to bring those people along, and to recognize that almost everyone has different ways of contributing.

We'll join the conversation at that point. Bart is the one who speaks first and does most of the talking in this part.

Campolo makes the argument that, from a purely logical, pragmatic perspective, there will inevitably be some people who are too far gone or too destructive and simply cannot be brought back to health, and those people must be "left behind" by society. McHargue cries at this, saying that is the reason that he remains Christian, that he clings to the belief that there are no people you can't save, because he spent his childhood being told that he was one of those.

I'm with Science Mike on this one, that's why I am a Christian. That's the core of the Christian faith, in my understanding, that every last one of us has value and worth, is made in the image of God, and worth saving. And I believe that, because I know, I *know* that my ankles are broken. I take more than I give. On my own merit I'm not worth saving. And yet, my experience is that God has loved me anyway, my Christian community has loved me anyway. And so my deep calling is to extend that love to others, however I can manage that, however broken and discounted and rejected they may be.

I'm not saying I manage to do that well, but that's my belief system in a nutshell.

And that is an alternative value. It's not rational. It is grounded on ideology that everyone is free to reject. And most do. But that's Christianity, I believe. That's what the Christian church was built on: loving the "least of these," taking in the babies that nobody else wanted, creating relationships between masters and slaves, risking their lives to care for those sick with the plague even while everyone else was running away. It's Dirk Willems, Anabaptist cliché, going back onto the ice to rescue the one who was chasing him, a move that would lead to his death.

That is the way of Jesus.

So those are some ways of alternative thinking. I'm sure there are others, and I'd love to hear your ideas.

Again, the call of Jesus is to question reality as it is presented to us, to look harder, to dig around, and find different ways of understanding. And especially to invite others into the process.

Welcome to Holy Week.