

*Based on Luke 19:39-40. Jesus Refuses to Be Silenced.*

There are two processions unfolding in Jerusalem as the week of Passover begins in the time of Jesus.

The first we know by heart. A cloak and a colt and a palm and a peasant rabbi from the sticks of Galilee reclaiming the heritage of his people for justice and peace. *Hosanna!* the people cry out with joy at this carefully planned demonstration of nonviolent resistance to unchecked power.

*Save us!* they exclaim, with every expectation their salvation may very well be at hand.

The first procession comes from the east, as the dawn of a new day rises for the festival of liberation the Jewish Passover celebrates. Not just *then*, our liberation from unchecked power, the festival insists, not just from Egypt, this first procession proclaims, but *now*, from the unchecked power of Rome!

The second procession, it turns out, is Rome itself.

The governor, Pontius Pilate, representing the unchecked power of an emperor described as Lord and Savior, the very Son of God, entering from the west at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers, with chariots and leather armor, golden eagles mounted on poles, drums and swords in a massive show of force designed to squelch any protest for fear of massive retribution.

The Day of Liberation is done before it can truly begin, this procession insists. Get in line, stay in line, and keep your mouth shut, the power of Rome proclaims, as a shadow of cross bars lingers permanently in the distance: a form of public terrorism designed to quash dissent.

Caught in the middle are the Pharisees, as referenced by Luke's Gospel in our Lesson today. The Pharisees become a straw man of sorts, and we have to be careful when we interpret them for today. Historically, the Pharisees are the predecessors of modern day Rabbinic Judaism. Any biblically based criticism of Pharisees in the time of Jesus must be couched in a comparative context. For us, the term Pharisee becomes a catch-all phrase for decent, law-abiding, faithful people, who, according to non-biblical sources, are genuinely just trying to keep the peace. They pay their taxes, they educate their children, they hold down good jobs, they try to live as well as they can, given the circumstances.

Not all that different from twenty-first century American Presbyterians. Just look in the mirror and see a Pharisee staring back at you.

Pharisees know full well the consequences of resisting the Roman Empire, even if that resistance is nonviolent. So they warn Jesus to stop. If you keep this up, you're gonna get someone killed. We're just trying to keep the

peace. Please, Jesus, help us help you!

The problem with Pharisees, though, is that we have a misguided, privileged understanding of what peace really is. For us, peace means we can sleep at night and keep our kids safe and maintain a steady income and stay in our happy bubble and call that peace.

But the quest of the Pharisees in Luke's Gospel to keep the boat from rocking only perpetuates local collaboration with the unchecked power of Rome. People are literally dying from this unchecked power, yet the Pharisees are crying *peace, peace where there is no peace*.

For a modern day parallel, go back and watch the performance of Samuel L. Jackson and Kendrick Lamar during this year's Super Bowl half-time show.

Performance protest art at its finest, as one talented visionary Black man tells another to *play the American game*, with all of its unchecked power against people of color. And the second talented visionary Black man says no. Too many people are dying.

Jesus, too, says no to playing the game.

It turns out there are two processions unfolding in Jerusalem in our Lesson today: one drenched in the full weight of unchecked imperial power; the other lightened with a levity that belies the moral conviction grounding the production. And the question Jesus leaves us modern day Pharisees with is, which procession are you in?

The Shepherdstown Ministerial Association has brought this question to our moment as we probed the life and ministry and death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a common read throughout the Season of Lent.

In 1933, as the Nazi government comes to power, Bonhoeffer clearly and prophetically calls out the danger and insists the German people join the Jesus procession. While some highly courageous souls do as Bonhoeffer asks, by and large the German church does not. They equivocate, they assimilate, and they capitulate. Pharisees every one.

It is easy for Bonhoeffer to despair.

*The best lack all conviction, as our poet says, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.*

Later, after his eventual arrest, as the horror of the Nazi regime has unfolded in earnest, facing execution, Bonhoeffer echoes our poet as he writes from prison regarding his fellow German Christians: *We have been*

*silent witnesses of evil deeds. We have learnt the arts of equivocation and pretence ... Are we still of any use?*

We at SPC want to be of use.

As unchecked power rises in our time, we form support groups and we rally and we make phone calls and we write letters and we consume enough news to know what is happening but not so much that we render ourselves paralyzed. We attend author forums and peacemaking panels and read books and watch documentaries. We give money and time and talent to the causes we care about. We are not silent witnesses and yet we still wonder if any of it will really make a difference in the end.

We are not promised that it will.

Jesus does die, after all, and it is only in hindsight that his followers come to see divine providence in that fact. In the moment, the death of Jesus is a profound betrayal, the movement he has carefully cultivated the past three years splinters, and his own best friend pretends he does not know him. Those who stick with Jesus to the end, mostly women, are powerless to stop the torture that unfolds. Not because women are so much better than men but because, in this culture, they lack power and are therefore assumed to be less of a threat.

Not only that, but unchecked power remains with us today, as the American empire wields power atop the rubble of all of the other empires that have followed the Romans, including the attempted empire of Nazi Germany. At some level, this is just the way things are, the human condition, the normalcy of civilization with its downsides compensated for by its upsides.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as well, wondered if anything he was doing would make a difference in the end. He preached and he wrote and he passed sensitive German secrets to his colleagues in Britain, but he never saw liberation for himself or his compatriots. In Germany, long after the war had ended, Bonhoeffer was considered a traitor, and his story was buried.

Today he is a hero. His writings are the ones we turn to now as we make sense of unchecked power on the rise today and the faithful role of the church in response. His insistence on costly grace and the call of the church to take up our cross and follow compels us all.

*Do not be silent!* Dietrich Bonhoeffer insists from the great beyond. *I tell you if we are silent, even these stones would shout!*

No, we are not promised we will see the difference our Jesus procession makes in our own time. We are not promised democracy forever or America forever or 401(k)s forever or even the building in which we worship forever.

What we are promised, in the story of Easter, is that the movement to challenge unchecked power can never be silenced. It can be hurt. It can be tortured. It can despair that hope is lost.

But it cannot be silenced.

The promise of Easter is that the procession of palm and the cloak and the colt led by a peasant rabbi from the sticks of Galilee reclaiming the heritage of his people for justice and peace will never cease. Somehow, someday, somewhere, someone will pick up the torch, pass the baton, and keep the journey going.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer passes the baton to us, he says, *What we shall need is not geniuses, or cynics, or misanthropes, or clever tacticians, but plain, honest, and straightforward people.*

Plain, honest, straightforward people, choosing good over evil and love over hate. At the end of the day, this is the choice we must make, and always. To be grounded in the conviction of Jesus as Palm Sunday becomes the journey of our lives. To join the procession of nonviolent liberating resistance to unchecked power. To hold onto a vision of wholeness and hope even when all evidence points to the contrary. To choose love and resilience and just plain showing up when it would be far easier to huddle in fear.

And when the Pharisaical pacifying compromising colluders call on us to play the game, to Just Say NO.