

**“Why Do We Stay in the Church?  
To Say No to the Powers that Killed Jesus”**

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

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Texts: Zechariah 9:9-10

Matthew 21:1-11

*“he crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,*

*‘Hosanna to the Son of David!*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*

*Hosanna in the highest heaven!’*

<sup>10</sup>*When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’*

*~ Matthew 21:9-10*

**Prayer**

**God-among-us,**

**Open our minds to the faith-inspiring words of the Gospel;**

**And give us courage to live with the burning desire**

**To practice our faith in the same way that**

**Jesus of Nazareth incarnated your love for humanity. Amen.**

Jesus could have kept his faith private on Palm Sunday. If he had understood his calling to be purely religious, Jesus could have entered the city quietly, reverently, and on foot along with all the other pilgrims who were going to Jerusalem to celebrate the Festival of the Passover. Had Jesus been concerned only about spirituality, he could have gone to the Temple, said his prayers, shared the Passover meal with his disciples and then he could have returned to Galilee where his religious teachings had given much hope to poor Jewish peasants. Even if we chose to look at Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem through the lens of the Theology of the Atonement, which has dominated Western Christianity since the High Middle Ages, and we affirmed without any questions the traditional Christological claim that Jesus went to Jerusalem because God wanted the innocent Son of God to die on the cross for the sins of humanity, his arrival in the city on the back of a donkey would still undermine the conventional Christian thinking that Jesus of Nazareth had no other purpose in life but to be a human sacrifice so a few human souls might live happily and peacefully, not in this world, but in the afterlife.

While in prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor the Nazis executed 78 years ago this month, grew increasingly uncomfortable with the understanding of the Christian faith as a religion of the afterlife where people are taught what to believe now so they can get to heaven later. In one of the many letters Bonhoeffer wrote from the Tegel Prison in the outskirts of Berlin, he said to a friend, ***“During the last year or so I’ve come to know and understand more and more the profound this-***

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***worldliness of Christianity. The Christian is not a homo religiosus, but simply [a human being], as Jesus was a man... For a long time... I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life... I discovered later, and I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that is it only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith... By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world – watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That I think, is faith; that is metanoia [which is the Greek word for a change of heart]; and that is how one becomes [human] and a Christian.”<sup>1</sup>***

On the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, he was launching himself squarely into the middle of the very messy, complicated, and highly charged sociopolitical life of the capital city. His journey to the Mount of Olives had been inspired by a profound this-worldly passion for the Kingdom of God and, on Palm Sunday, Jesus was ready to let both the Temple authorities and the Romans know that he had something to say to the powers of this world.

For Jesus of Nazareth, God's Kingdom was much more than a religious framework to cultivate a dynamic personal life of faith. In the Gospels, the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached and announced has clear social, political, economic and religious implications. God's Kingdom is about the restoration of creation and the transformation of human hearts so we may accept and work for all the good God has in mind for humankind. The this-worldliness of God's Kingdom made Jesus into a human being that could not be silent or indifferent in the face of the problems and complexities of human history and the opportunities in human life. The very well-thought-out plan to enter the city mounted on a donkey, in the same way the prophet Zechariah had imagined the arrival of the peace-making messiah, was a loud protest against the religious institution in Jerusalem and the politics of the Empire. On Palm Sunday, Jesus went to Jerusalem, the city where Herod ruled as a puppet king of the Romans; where Pilate was governor and had the authority to decide who lived and who died; where Caiaphas was the High Priest appointed by Rome and Jesus staged a march for a different sociopolitical order. The first Palm Sunday parade was not a festive religious pageant at all, it was a political protest against a violent and unjust world. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was a planned demonstration in the name of a theology of liberation and a very this-worldly expression of faith in the possibility of the Kingdom of God and its alternative economics, its opposition to violence, and its radical commitment to peace.

For centuries, the Church has tried to manage and tone down the this-worldliness of Jesus' life. Christians have been taught to read every word Jesus said, to listen to all his teachings and to interpret all his actions through either a purely religious or a spiritual filter. The Apostle Paul himself sought to re-direct the focus of the Early Christian movement away from Jesus, the human being, to the Risen Christ. In his Letters, Paul never speaks of Jesus of Nazareth and his human life. He never quotes Jesus' words and teachings.

Paul makes no effort to place Jesus within his Jewish historic context. What matters for Paul is the resurrection and the new age he believes dawned upon the world on Easter. In Paul's religious worldview, the faith of the human being Jesus would have been hollow without the resurrection. Jesus would have been nothing more than another first-century Jewish martyr, a would-be hero, a well-intentioned but failed messiah if his view of God's Kingdom had died on the cross. This Pauline emphasis on the Living Christ has had such a massive influence on the Church that many church historians say that Christianity, as we know it, is the religion of Paul rather than the embodiment of the religious, ethical, moral and political teachings of Jesus.

There is no question that both the cross and the resurrection are central to the Christian message. Easter infuses the Christian faith with a powerful redemptive proclamation. In a book they co-authored, the late Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan said, "***Without an emphasis on Easter, the cross is simply pain, agony and horror...But Easter as the reversal of Good Friday means God's vindication of Jesus' passion for the Kingdom of God, for God's justice, and God's 'no' to the powers that killed him.***"<sup>2</sup> The resurrection, when placed in the context of Jesus' life and death, is an affirmation of Jesus' very public, socially engaged, politically active and this-worldly faith. Because of Easter, we stay in the Church, say "no" to the powers that killed Jesus and affirm again and again the central promise of the Christian faith, which is that it is not the cross-building, crucifying powers of this world that will have the final word in history but the faith of the One who carried the cross, was crucified and proclaimed God's Kingdom of peace, forgiveness, reconciliation and abundance.

Walter Brueggemann, one of the great Christian prophets of our days, recognizes that the very much this-worldly faith of Jesus is not for the faint of heart. "***It is an incredibly upstream vocation,***" Brueggemann said, "***to live a different kind of life in order that the world may come to know that the pathologies in which we get caught are not the truth of our life.***"<sup>3</sup> Putting Jesus' ministry succinctly, it was driven by his passion for God's Kingdom and by the courage to swim upstream, to protest the perversions caused by the politics of the powerful and to speak about true life in the midst of a culture of inequality, injustice, violence, and untimely death. And Palm Sunday reminds us that much like Jesus, we too have to be politically and socially engaged because if our faith is walled off from our society, the Herods and Pilates and Tiberiuses of the world will continue to dictate policies and programs that support and maintain the death-dealing *status quo*.

And if we are serious about Jesus' this-worldly faith, we cannot avoid throwing ourselves into national conversations about complex and yet relevant issues such as gun violence. Three 9-year-olds, three adults, and, yes, we have to include the shooter as well, all of them lost their lives last Monday because our society and our elected officials have been unable to imagine America without mass shootings. According to Gun Violence Archive, the not-for-profit research group that tracks gun violence in the country, so far

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there have been 130 mass shootings in this new year, which means that there have been more shootings than days in 2023.<sup>4</sup>

The President of the United States and one of the major political parties in the nation have said publicly that there is nothing else they can do to enact the wide-ranging gun reform legislation needed to reduce gun violence. Whether their inaction is a matter of political expedience, cowardice or indifference is anyone's guess, but the undeniable fact is that our lawmakers have not done enough to prevent the alarming and outrageous loss of American lives to guns.

We all know that guns kill people. We all know that we are the most heavily armed population in the world. We all know that for many Americans the right to own assault weapons comes with their mothers' milk. We all know that gun violence and mass shootings are a public health crisis in our country. I believe we all know that mass shootings in schools, theaters, grocery stores, parades and places of worship are a uniquely American problem that thoughts and prayers alone cannot resolve. And yet, we, as a society, are unable and unwilling to take seriously the tears, the pain, the grief, suffering and trauma of those who have lost children, parents, spouses, friends, neighbors and loved ones to gun violence. We blame this horrific social problem on mental health and criminals and accept without protest that no action toward gun legislation is the norm in America. As it happens in the wake of every mass shooting, we express anger and sympathy, but, at the end of the day, after the flowers left at the sites of preventable deaths wither and the candles used in community vigils are extinguished, we quietly allow politics and a constitutional amendment to decide the fate of those who will find themselves on the path of another active killer. Bonhoeffer was right to point out that we are human beings rather than "***homo religiosus***." But we are also *homo sapiens*, "*creatures that are wise and intelligent*" and you would think that wise and intelligent human beings would have figured out by now that life must take precedence over the right to buy, sell, carry and fire a gun.

At the core of this national dialogue about guns lies a vision of how we hope our society will look like; whether we will move in the direction of protecting life or guns. But for Christians, gun violence is not only a political matter or social problem; it is also a theological issue. Those of us who share Jesus' determination to not let Herod, Pilate, Caiaphas, and not even Caesar define what politics, economics, peace and justice are about have to side with hope, with courage, and with God's gift of life. We have to expose the distortions created by those who are unwilling, reluctant or downright opposed to doing everything possible to keep people from using their guns to kill innocent human beings. Speaking loudly against the social pathology that makes the shooting in Nashville be just another shooting in America is how you and I witness to the this-worldly faith of Jesus Christ that we remember, celebrate and embrace on Palm Sunday.

The Gospel according to St. Matthew says that when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken. The Greek word Matthew used to describe the mood of the people

in the city is the same word that describes an earthquake. Even though Jesus comes into the city on a donkey, followed by a small band of religious nobodies and Kingdom dreamers, his non-violent protest against politics as usual shakes the foundation on which the powers of the world rests. On Holy Week, the powerful forces of the *status quo* will come together to find a way to crucify Jesus in the hope that his transformative and liberating message about God's Kingdom may die on the cross with him. But major shifts had already happened when Jesus practiced his faith. The tectonic plates of history had already begun to move and not even the Empire could stop them. The life-giving and world-re-making faith of Jesus remained alive and it is still very much alive each time you and I gather and dare to throw ourselves right into the sociopolitical life of our town, state, nation and the world, swimming upstream with a message of hope and faith and holding on to a vision of God's Kingdom of justice and peace among us.

Blessed be the One who invites each one of us not to be “*homo religiosus*,” but true human beings who practice our faith by loving life and saying a loud and unequivocal “no” to gun violence.

And may the whole church say: Amen!

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<sup>1</sup> Eberhard Bethge, Editor in Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Letters and Papers from Prison, pp. 368-70.

<sup>2</sup> Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan in The Last Week, pp. 209-10.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann in A Way Other Than Our Own, location 869 [Kindle Edition].

<sup>4</sup> Gun Violence Archive { <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting?page=1>].