

Poor People's March
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Psalm 118
Mark 11:1-11

It started out a week like others before. It was the beginning of Passover and to celebrate there was always a grand procession to Jerusalem, a march for those with access to the Emperor's Club. Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea and Samaria, and his boys came up from Caesarea Martima, a beautiful resort town to the west where he lived in a lap of luxury. There was a procession planned, an imperial procession, like all the years before. From the west, Pontius Pilate entered Jerusalem making his way towards the recently remodeled temple that Herod built before he died. The temple had become the center and administrator of all things political. And so, the temple, modest before, had spacious courts now, elegant colonnades, excessive gold and marble covering the grounds. Pilate worked his way towards the temple and then into his city home that Herod had taken care of as well before he passed, with columns of colored marble and glittering fountains, shaded pools, ceilings painted with gold and vermillion, chairs of precious metals inlaid with jewels, mosaic floors with agate and lapis lazuli, a dining room that could comfortably seat 300.

Jerusalem was the city just ruled by "Herod the Great," or "Herod the Monstrous" according to many Jews. He spent a lot of cash, abused a lot of people and stole a lot of land to get it, had perfected the art of oppression, and near the end of his reign was psychopathically paranoid. He made the temple into one like no other and set himself and all who followed him up for luxurious living.

Soon after Jesus was born, Herod died.

After Herod's death Rome divided up the kingdom into three parts, each ruled by one of his sons. Local elites continued to be chosen to administer the day-to-day oppression, business as usual. In 6CE the ruler of Judea and Samaria, was removed and his role was assigned to the temple and its authorities. Pontius Pilate was appointed top dog. The temple became the central economic and political institution in the country. The temple was not unlike other political institutions of its day, and of today too. It had all of the defining characteristics: rule by a few, economic exploitation, and religious legitimization of oppression.

To say the least, Jesus was critical of this arrangement. Unrest had begun to gather.

But yet, it started out a week like Passovers before. Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea and Samaria, came in from his sweet pad on the coast with his horses and his riches, his soldiers and his power, his access to the Emperor's Club. He processed in just to remind everyone of his power, just in case they didn't pay their taxes, or give up their property when asked, he processed in just to remind everyone of what he could do if there were any revolts, any protests, any "problems" during the Jewish festivals.

Passover is the festival to celebrate the Jewish people's liberation from an earlier empire. And so if one puts two and two together, this week may be a perfect time for the working Jews to start a revolt, to demand liberation.[1]

This Passover would be different from all the others.

In the face of this, there was another procession that day, the one we read about in Mark's gospel. We don't know how well publicized it was, this poor people's march. We aren't sure if those who attended this procession were punished afterwards for bringing their attention away from the royal march. We don't know if those who attended this other procession were in on the plan, if Jesus thought he would have a good solid group of allies who attended his march. We don't know if Pilate had his spies attending, snapping pictures of the offenders to turn in to the authorities.

Jerusalem wasn't such a stable environment. Memories were recent of persecution of those who had spoken in opposition to the domination system. Rebellions were not so far away, which resulted in loved ones taken to slavery. And the stories were told through the generations of the exile, the exile, the time when the people were divided, the wealthy sent away, the others left behind, with questions so big swirling about that the anxiety could be felt like pollen in the air, with doubts so deep that sleep was never easy.

And so those had the nerve to boycott the other march, the royal, rich march for those who entered the Emperor's Club. For those who had the nerve to attend the poor people's counter protest march. For those, they came laughing with nervousness, walking on egg shells waiting to see what might happen.

After so many years of attendance at the royal march, where they would never in their lifetime be able to as much as touch the horses and the gold and the jewels, the Jewish peasants could see a bit more of themselves in this procession. Instead of majestic horses pulling beautiful carriages, there was a colt, one single little colt. Instead of fancy saddles lined with gold and royal fabric the colt was covered in cloaks, jackets of the poor. Instead of perfumed rose petals spread along the road there were palms cut from the fields. The cloaks, the branches were not only of the people but they were also connected to religious festivals and kings of long ago. They represented a different kind of kingship,

a different kind of religious devotion than was being used during these days to lift a few up at the expense of the many who supported them.

So perhaps those who had the guts to attend the counter-protest-poor people's march, who had the guts to organize the march, to go ahead and find the colt, to strip themselves of their cloaks to protect the colt were just tired enough of the corruption, of the greed, of the religious oppression based system of the Emperor's Club march which did anything it had to do to get the money that it needed and the power that it thrived on. Perhaps those people were just tired and didn't want to go through their lives anymore saying that they hadn't tried, they hadn't spoken, they hadn't risked their lives.

And so the shouting began: "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna! Hosanna! In the highest heaven Hosanna!" Hosanna, meaning "save now"[2] was shouted at Jesus riding in on the little colt with the goods of the poor protecting him. Save us now! Save us from oppression! Save us from Pilate! Save us from ourselves! Save us from the lies we have heard and told and ingested and believe! Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest heaven!

And into the temple he entered, the temple that had become the source of tension, the source of power, the source of decision-making, where most were not allowed in. He entered the temple, and it was late and he was tired. So he saved his energy for the temple for Monday, after he had gotten some sleep, some time to take in what had happened already this Sunday. He was to continue the turning on its head that had happened on Sunday on Monday as he cleansed the temple of its exploitation, of its cruelty, of its abuse of power.

How quickly our shouts become "Crucify Him!" by the end of the week when we begin to be scared, when we take it in, what it means to be saved, to fight for salvation, to fight for freedom from all of our oppressions, from all our systems we have put comfortably in place which, while they may not be what we need most, are those we know. How quickly our shouts become "Crucify Him!" by the end of the week when we think it is easier to kill the messenger than it is to change ourselves, to change the systems and structures that allow for and thrive on the Emperor's Club. How quickly our shouts become "Crucify Him!" by the end of the week when it sinks in how hard it is to change our religious institutions that hold the keys that create cultures of welcoming some and rejecting others, giving those with enough power even more and stripping those with nothing of the little they have. How quickly our shouts turn to "Crucify Him!" when it sinks in how different our churches and our governments and our places of employment and our families would have to be if we listened to Jesus who shows us how we might be saved, from ourselves, from our history in the counter-protest poor people's march that we remember today.

How quickly then do we realize what we have done without being able to help ourselves. How did our cries go from Save Us to Crucify Him? How did these words come from our mouths? How did our hearts allow it?

It started out as a normal Passover week, or so they thought. A royal procession was planned, the festival was ready to go, the holidays a time for celebration.

No one knew though that these other plans had been in the works for quite some time, the plans for imagining this other world. Rosa Parks didn't just sit on the bus one day because her feet hurt. Jesus didn't just decide to ride into town on a colt one day because he was tired of the insanity of the royal march. Liberation doesn't just come one day because those in power just decide to change the systems and structures in place that continue to make it harder for some over others to survive and thrive. None of this just happens.

It started out as a normal Passover week, or so they all thought. A royal procession was planned, but this year it was to be different. A new procession was to begin, a new tradition was started that we have the strength to enter into each year still. A gift of a march made from common elements, of holey coats and branches, a gift of a march made from the stuff that makes our homes and covers our backs are what lead us today into liberation, into salvation. Hosanna in the highest!

[1] The above 7 paragraphs were heavily taken from pgs. 1-30 in Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan's *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*, 2006, Harper SanFrancisco

[2] From footnotes on pg. 1831 in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 2003 by Abingdon Press, Nashville.