**God’s Gift of Freedom**

**Act One: Protest (Palm Sunday)**

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Palm Sunday

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There are many ways to tell a good story, but being a priest, my favorite is liturgy. Today begins the Holy Week, in which, through the daily rituals and worship of this week, we enter into our shared story. It’s a story that is complicated, suspenseful, intimate, passionate and redemptive, about God’s gift of freedom to us. It’s a long one. It will take us 8 days to tell. But hang in there; it’s got a great ending.

One of my favorite storytellers isn’t a liturgist, he’s a radio host: Ira Glass. If you know his show, “This American Life” he tells several unique stories that seem disconnected from each other, and yet all touch on that same theme from different angles. This is how I like to think about Holy Week, which has such varied stories: some loud and public, some quiet and intimate, some easy to understand some impossible to fathom, some deeply attractive and some wholly repulsive. And yet, they are all connected to God’s saving work. This year for Holy Week, Rachel and I are borrowing Ira Glass’ storytelling frame for our preaching. Over the next eight days, we will explore with you a series of stories about Jesus’ last week. They are each freedom stories in some way. Each one offers us its own pathway into God’s gift of spiritual freedom. This story is told in five acts, beginning today with Palm Sunday. As you listen today and in the days to come, I wonder, which part of this amazing story is about you?

Act One: Protest.

In some ways, the people flocking to Jerusalem that year were just like every other year at Passover. It was normal for the streets to be clogged with busy pilgrims before the festival -- a barely manageable frenzy in which each was trying to meet his or her own needs: finding a place to stay, changing their money, buying a sacrificial animal at the Temple, etc. But in other ways, this year was quite different. Instead of a mass of disorganized and unconnected people careening through the streets, each pursuing his or her individual agendas: seeking shelter and sacrificial animals and maybe something to eat – this year, there was Jesus. Could he be the Messiah, they wondered aloud, the one to finally bring them freedom from the Roman oppressors? Their yearning for that freedom was real and urgent. Innocent people were dying. Unresponsive leaders did nothing, except double down on their commitments to hold the line against dissent. Crucifixions were common. Like a magnet drawn through a sea of metal shavings, Jesus’ presence at the Passover festival created a focus for the crowd’s anguish and attention. He turned a cacophonous chaos into an ordered procession moving steadily from Bethany towards the Temple in Jerusalem. Their cry was hosanna, hosanna in the highest, which means literally: Save us, great one. They thought this was the uprising of their liberation. They didn’t realize the rising that would actually free them was still eight days away.

We don’t cry hosanna much anymore. But we know when we our lives need saving. Yesterday, following nationwide student walk-outs earlier in the month, many participated in or followed the news of the March for Our Lives in Washington DC, Boston, and around the world. Hundreds of thousands of high school students and their allies gathered and demonstrated to voice their frustration with a governing authorities that have been indifferent to their suffering. Innocent people are dying. Others are fearful. And for the most part, our political leaders continue to preserve the status quo and double down to protect their own power. For decades since the Vietnam War, generations of American teenagers (my own included) have been criticized for their political apathy and disengagement. We’ve clearly entered a new time and place, where young peoples’ passions have been stoked, voices found, and protests made public. The cry has gone up, and it is a latter-day hosanna: save us.

While Jesus and his disciples weren’t exactly organizing a rally on Palm Sunday in a way that we would recognize today: with speeches, signs and media slogans, it’s clear he knew what he was doing. As Marcus Borg notes, Jesus’ peace procession was “not a last-minute decision” but a carefully crafted act of performance art for a specific audience. His final holy week began with protest. So, too, this year, does ours.

I find myself both deeply attracted to and at times frustrated by public protest. To me, protest’s most effective aspect is how it releases the latent passions within people hearts. Many of us have yearnings for our common life that run deep and struggle to find expression in voice or action. We long to be the best versions of ourselves, individually and as a society. And we fail to make those yearnings real so often that we begin to question the legitimacy of our yearnings. Economic freedom for all. Racial harmony. Gender equality. Universal peace. We fail so often, we can begin to wonder how deep or how broad our collective commitment really is to these goals. Protest reminds us of the depth and breadth of these yearnings -- that the only thing that will evolve our common life is sustained commitment to the passions for a transformed future that live deep within so many of us.

Jesus knew what those passions were in the hearts of the faithful in his day. He knew of their yearning for greater freedom from an oppressive political and military regime. His carefully choreographed donkey parade literally “went nowhere.” It started in Bethany, entered the Jerusalem and then went right back out to Bethany again. But getting somewhere that day wasn’t the point. It was about creating a visible focus of the internal longings of his people. He invited them to hope out loud. And he invites us to do the same. The invitation to join in protest challenges us to decide how strong our yearnings are, and encourages us by revealing the strength of similar yearnings in others. If we accept to invitation to follow, it can inspire our confidence to speak. And especially for those who have previously been silenced, there is a certain amount of freedom just in the act of naming your desire among others who share the same hopes.

Of course, as God knows, not every deep yearning within us is God-given. Jesus may have been gathering those yearning for liberation into a peace movement…but many in the crowd were ready for war. Many attracted to the vision of freedom believed it possible, necessary even, to obtain their freedom by force. Even some of his own disciples would eventually take up arms when push came quite literally to shove. But Jesus knew different. He knew that liberation might well be obtained by the sword, but the depth of freedom his people yearned for could only be obtained through other means. And yet, he invited all to follow him. Everyone. There was no ideological purity test to walk behind his little donkey. No signed statement of commitment to specific talking points. He aroused the yearnings of the people. He reminded them of their desire for freedom, even a freedom they didn’t fully understand, at a cost they couldn’t possibly fathom.

That’s because he knew that protest is a compelling, even necessary first act in the drama of transformation. Stirring up our heartfelt passions sets the action in motion, even though it alone cannot bring the yearned-for outcome to fruition. This is what frustrates me, and perhaps some of you, about the work of protest. It kicks of a slow, agonizingly slow, pathway to change. When the day of demonstration is over and everyone is back in Bethany…or Bedford or Billerica…no policy has changed. No freedom won. What was the point? We go back to what we think of as our real lives; abandoning the we and returning to the me.

Just four days after the crowd’s hosannas the same voices are shouting *crucify* – ready to give up on their yearnings because they despair of change. We may not have such a dramatic reversal as that, but we, too, turn to other desires, pursue other claims on our time and our energy. How often have we seen the passion so palpable in mass marches fade out when the pageantry and stagecraft of the protest has faded? And the powerful know this is coming, and use it to preserve the status quo. How often have we seen the politicians slow-play their responses to mass protest, promise change in a page-one sound-byte and then backpedal in a Friday night news dump, introduce legislation with great fanfare and then kill it in committee or a private lunch with lobbyists? The stall tactics work because they know they can rely on distraction or despair to creep in and disperse the crowds.

Protest is just act one in this eight day drama. Alone, it fails to bring God’s gift of greater freedom to first century Palestinians or to 21st century Americans. But the freedom God intends for humanity cannot be stopped by the tyrants of this world or even by our own despair. The power of the sword, the power of the protest, even of the power of the ballot box may liberate us, but cannot bring us the fullness freedom. There is a deeper journey to walk with Jesus. The first steps may have been waving palms in the parking lot this morning, or waving signs on the Common yesterday. But our lamentations at the world’s brokenness, our frustration about our own helplessness, and our demonstrations against injustice are just the beginning of God’s holy work in us in this holy week. Amen.