

Palm Sunday

Luke 19:28-40; Isa. 50: 4-9a; Phil. 2:5-11; Luke 23:1-49

## The Scapegoat<sup>\*</sup>

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March 20, 2016

One of the most striking aspects about the Palm Sunday liturgy is how quickly things change. In the space of less than an hour, we travel from the heights of joy to the depths of despair; from the Liturgy of the Palms to the Liturgy of the Passion; from the triumph of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem to the humiliation of his crucifixion outside the city walls; and from our cries of "Hosanna" to our shouts of "Crucify, crucify him!"

There is something deeply unsettling about the way in which we – the crowd – take on the role of the mob during the passion narrative, and turn so quickly against Jesus.

Indeed, the Palm Sunday liturgy can be seen as a reenactment of mob violence that spirals out of control. A central question of Palm Sunday is this: How is it possible that – in less than a week's time – the people of Jerusalem go from welcoming Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, to demanding that he be humiliated, tortured, and executed as a common criminal?

The late philosopher and literary critic Renee Girard has made a powerful connection between mob violence and scapegoating. According to Girard, whenever various factions compete for power in a given society, they often join forces and channel their hostility towards an innocent third party, the scapegoat. Through the sacrificial death of the scapegoat, greater violence is averted, and so-called "peace" is restored to the community.

Think for a minute about the groups that are scapegoated today for the problems – either real or imagined – of our society: undocumented immigrants, religious minorities, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTIQ people, the economically disadvantaged, and the list goes on and on. Historical examples of scapegoating also abound, whether it be the lynchings of African Americans in the 19th century, the ethnic and religious genocides of the 20th (including the Holocaust), or the refugee crises of today.

In today's passion reading from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is scapegoated by the religious and political authorities of his day. He is accused by the religious elders of literally "perverting" the nation and stirring up the people by his teachings.

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Indeed, Jesus' sentencing and execution was the result of an uneasy alliance between the powers and principalities of his day. For example, Luke mentions that King Herod and the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, who were previously enemies, actually "became friends with each other" on the same day that the chief priests and scribes made their accusations against Jesus.

But Jesus is ultimately a different kind of scapegoat. In fact, it is through Jesus' scapegoating that God wants all scapegoating to end.

According to Renee Girard, Jesus was the scapegoat *par excellence*. As Paul writes in his Letter to the Philippians, God emptied Godself of divinity and took the form of a human. In so doing, God made sure that our tendency to scapegoat others would be revealed for all to see. As Girard writes:

Christ, the son of God, is the ultimate "scapegoat" – precisely because he is the son of God, and since he is innocent, he exposes all the myths of scapegoating and shows that the victims were innocent and the communities guilty.

This week, the bishops of the Episcopal Church issued a "Word to the Church." They expressed a deep concern about the "violent forces being released by this season's political rhetoric." They wrote:

Americans are turning against their neighbors, particularly on the margins of society. . . . We reject the idolatrous notion that we can ensure the safety of some by sacrificing the hopes of others. No matter where we fall on the political spectrum, we must respect the dignity of every human being and we must seek the common good above all else.

And that is the central lesson of Palm Sunday: it is not just "the other" – that is, a particular government, a particular political party, or even a particular politician – that does the scapegoating. Rather, we are *all* complicit in the act of shouting "crucify him." We have *all*, in the words of the bishops, nailed "the weak and the blameless" to the cross in order "to protect [our] own status and power." And it is only through God's forgiveness and gift of grace that we are able to turn our minds away from Golgotha, the place of The Scapegoat, and towards the new Jerusalem.

As we begin our journey through Holy Week, let us keep in mind God's mercy and forgiveness as experienced through the great liturgies of the coming week: the footwashing on Maundy Thursday, the veneration of the cross on Good Friday, the stillness of the tomb on Holy Saturday, and the joyful resurrection on Easter Sunday.

May God grant us the courage and the strength to accompany Jesus each step of the way along this sacred journey.