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First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
April 14, 2019
Palm Sunday

Great Expectations
Luke 19:28-40

Two summers ago, early one August morning, people gathered at a sunrise service in Charlottesville, Virginia. They gathered at sunrise for a prayer service not because it was Easter, but because hate was coming to Charlottesville that day. From across the country, white supremacists and Nazi sympathizers came to a Unite the Right rally to fight the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee from the city. Cornell West led the prayer service, asking for God's blessing on the ministers and activists who would serve as peacekeepers that day, and praying for peace. The people of faith and anti-fascist activists came from up and down the Eastern seaboard because they couldn't let the hatred and violence and vitriol spewed by the white nationalists go unchallenged. If you remember the news reports, the right wing folks came in their white polo shirts with their tiki torches and their hateful slogans. They came in their camouflage with their guns and their clubs and their rage. The counter-protestors came, too, with their clerical collars and their stoles and their bandanas and their songs and their conviction that all people reflect the image of God, no matter their race or ethnicity or religion or ability or gender identity or sexual orientation.

What happened that day in Charlottesville was scary. There were violent clashes between the right wingers and the antifa. A peace activist named Heather Heyer was killed and 28 others were injured by a car driven by an avowed white nationalist. Ministers stood arm in arm to block the entrance to the park where the rally was to take place, and when they were pushed aside, they kneeled in the street to bear witness. One minister who was there that day tweeted, "they had their guns and shields. We had our songs, our faith, our love. And we had each other."¹ It was a confrontation between the power of love and the death dealing power of hate.

Today, we remember and celebrate a march that looked pretty different from the clash in Charlottesville: on a dusty road leading down from the Mt. of Olives, a humble man on a donkey and a crowd of peasants make their way to Jerusalem. It may not be apparent at first, but the counter-protest in Charlottesville and the joyful procession of Christ and his disciples have much in common. Both represent a confrontation between the power of love and the powers that be; both demonstrate God's work to subvert violence of this world through the work of peace.

¹ Gray, Susan Frederick, tweet quoted in "Meet the Clergy Who Stared Down White Supremacists in Charlottesville," by Jack Jenkins in ThinkProgress, August 16, 2017, <https://thinkprogress.org/clergy-in-charlottesville-e95752415c3e/>

Jesus does much of his ministry in the gospel of Luke while on his way to Jerusalem. When he finally gets there, he arrives as its conqueror, hailed as a king by his people.

A Roman general, returning home victoriously, would charge through the city gates in a chariot led by prancing white horses, surrounded by the spoils of war. He would go directly to the temple and make a sacrifice to the gods.

Jesus's procession reflects this tradition, but turns it on its head. He is called a King but he arrives on a donkey, just as the prophet Zechariah predicted the messiah would come. And it's not just any donkey, it's a conscripted donkey, one that has never been ridden, taken for the task simply because the Lord needed it. When he arrives in Jerusalem he goes straight to the temple – but not to make a sacrifice. Instead, he goes to throw out the merchants and moneylenders, to protest those who were preying on poor people at the very heart and home of the Jewish community. Luke tells us that his actions at the temple provokes the religious leaders, who begin looking for a way to have him killed.

It's hard to say if this is what his disciples, the ones who called him king, expected him to do. Three times they have heard him predict that he will be handed over to the authorities, beaten, and killed, and on the third day rise again. And yet, as he approaches Jerusalem, they are joyful! The people praise God and proclaim peace! They are overjoyed because they know the peace he's brought to their lives. They've experienced the peace he promises in their homes, they have seen it in their communities and in villages across Galilee. Through his healing and teaching, he has brought:

- peace of mind to those who had been suffering.
- peace of belonging to those who had been excluded.
- peace of healing for those who were broken.
- peace of comfort for those who had been grieving.
- peace of wisdom for those who sought truth.
- peace of love for those who had been called unloveable.
- peace of forgiveness to every one of us who is in need of it.

They have seen all of this and more. The disciples follow him because they believe he is the messiah, the one sent by God to overthrow their oppressors and rule Israel as a just and mighty king. They had great expectations for Jesus... and so do we. It's why on this day, we, too, shout Hosannah! which means, "save us!"

It's why we wave palms and come, year after year, to join with our Catholic friends and process around the block, bearing witness to Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem. It may not seem like much – twenty minutes of togetherness, marked by the sound of our bagpiper and the smell of their incense and maybe a splash of holy water on your face. But in a fractured and divided world, demonstrations of unity are too few and far between. And it matters. It matters that we are joined together as the body of Christ, to be agents of God's peace and reconciliation in a world in desperate need of it.

Jesus came offering salvation, but not in the way that the disciples expected. God's plan was bigger than they realized. In Christ, God turned tables in the temple and challenged religion that was more focused on rules than righteousness, more about purity than inclusion, more concerned with ritual than with love. In Christ, God took on the empire that ruled by fear and threat of violence; God challenged those who would oppress, exploit, and enslave their fellow humans. God's plan for salvation was bigger than the Jews, bigger even than Rome. Through the hands and heart of Jesus, God healed and taught not only Jesus' own people, but also the Roman centurion and people shut out of polite company: Zaccheus the tax collector, the possessed, the sick, the insane, and sex workers and Samaritans, too. God's plan of salvation is one even the stones would shout about, because God is at work to redeem and reconcile all of creation.

The air must have crackled with hope and excitement that day as they made their way slowly toward the city, shouts of joy in the air and cloaks soft underfoot. Jesus had to know the conflict and terror that lay ahead for them, must have seen the threat of the cross in his future, but he doesn't seem to be afraid. He is the power of love walking, courageously undaunted by the power of Rome and the power of the religious leaders.

We live in interesting times. Because I think we've seen something like this, too. The power of love marching onward, standing up to the power of sin and domination. It could certainly be seen in the faces of the clergy and other activists in Charlottesville who stood up to the evil of white supremacy on that day. We've seen it at protest marches. At pride parades. And every place people peacefully confront systems that dehumanize or dominate. But the confrontation between powers is not always so overt. We can glimpse it, just a glimmer, each time we choose peace instead of violence. When we step back from an argument and choose instead to let it go. When we choose to show grace and offer forgiveness. When we respond with love to a person in need or in pain, who is confused or struggling. When we stand up to the permeation of guns in our culture, and decide instead to be people who choose peace, as our session reaffirmed when they met a few weeks ago.

What about you? Where have you seen the power of love standing up to the powers that be? When have you experienced the peace Christ offers?

This week, I invite you to join us as we follow Jesus. We will see his love made real around a table with friends in the meal we will share on Thursday. We will see his love even unto death, which we will remember on Friday. The testimony of this holy week is that Jesus does whatever it takes to heal, to save, and to free us from the powers of sin and death. Have courage, because even though the powers that be threaten to undo us, we have our faith. We have our songs, and our love. And we have each other. Today we

follow him into Jerusalem, celebrating the peace he offers and the hope we find in him, praying that his kingdom will come -- a kingdom governed not by the sword but by love, not by violence but by peace. A kingdom that transcends national boundaries because it resides within each one of us, and has the potential to transform all of creation. May it be so.