

Sermon March 25, 2018 Palm Sunday March On! Cara B. Hochhalter

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 and Mark 11:1-11

On this weekend when we remember Jesus, riding humbly into Jerusalem, marching towards the powers that be with a small procession of followers, waving palms and singing Hosannas; I decided that on this weekend, I also could march.... I took my sign that read "Ban Assault Weapons" on one side and "Listen to the Students" on the other...and I walked along with a crowd that seemed like thousands, leaving from Pioneer Valley High School to the City Hall in Northampton.

Organized beautifully by students, *they* led the procession. We were not waving palms but many were waving signs that read things like..."No Fear in Schools" "No one needs an assault weapon" "Buy books, not guns" and "No Silence about Gun Violence." There was one sign that had the words "thoughts and prayers" crossed out and replaced with the word "action." I understand the idea, but I wanted to say that it was from my thoughts and prayers that I was there marching....Another sign read, "These kids are the answer to my thoughts and prayers!"

Rather than singing Hosanna---which by the way, is a word of praise but also in the Hebrew means, *save us now*--- the students yesterday led us in singing Halleluia, by Leonard Cohen...Halleluia, Halleluia...that one...We sang this in between the naming of 17 students each with a one-sentence description. The entire crowd then kneeled in quiet remembrance for one minute.

It was moving. I kept thinking about Jesus. Would he cry to hear the stories of these students...how far have we come in protecting the "least of these." Yet, all of us together, young and older, can make a change for the better.

Let us be in prayer: God of infinite love and hope, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The stories and parables that Jesus told were not about believing in him or else. No. Predominantly, the lessons Jesus taught were about loving God so much that we cannot help but reach out to those in need...seeing across differences to offer a helping hand to the poor, the orphans, the widows, to the least of these...to students and people of color who fear for their lives....Jesus taught us how to love across boundaries to shine the light of God on all people and all creatures.

This was the Jesus who marched into Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday. You have to understand that the people were under occupation by Rome...it was a brutal occupation with much suffering and poverty. Pontius Pilate ruled Jerusalem and put down any uprisings, even demonstrations. Jewish leaders warned Jesus as he came marching in. They warned him that the powers that be would put a stop to his growing following...they would put a stop to him.

But, Jesus marched straight toward the governing power...not with an armed revolt. You see, Jesus never carried a gun and he told others to put down their swords. He never advocated violence. Jesus always, came in the power of love...this God-drawn love was so incredible that we are still praising Jesus today...more than 2000 years later, for showing us how this love could be lived out. Jesus' march was a peaceful protest that has influenced the non-violent peace movements across our generations...and even today. Thanks be to God!

Some of you are familiar with Sojourners Magazine and its editor, Jim Wallis, who is an American Baptist minister. In this unashamedly Christian magazine, Wallis is not afraid to confront difficult issues of the day. He is highly respected among liberals and conservatives, republicans and democrats, churches on the right and the left. I think of him as a bridge whose outspoken truth-telling is so badly needed in our times...perhaps Jim Wallis is a modern-day prophet?

So, let's listen to an epistle sent out by Jim Wallis especially for this Palm Sunday...today. He urges us to "Reclaim Jesus!" And in doing that, Jim Wallis is not afraid to blast the powers that be in our own times. He makes a mighty call for us to "reclaim Jesus" and reject the direction our country is headed.

He cites six beliefs, as followers of Christ, and what we should then reject. I will briefly summarize them using mostly his words....and you can see for yourself if you agree. He writes:

- 1) If we believe that human beings [and all creation] are made in the image of God; a likeness that confers divine dignity, worth and God-given equality---then we reject white nationalism and racism in our nation, even at the highest levels of political leadership. Instead, we *embrace* racial justice and healing as they are biblical and theological...and we will give thanks for the prophetic role of the historic black churches in America when they have called for a more faithful following of the Gospel.

- 2) If we believe that we are one body in Christ, there should be no oppression based on race, gender, identity or class...then we reject mistreatment, abuse, and the assault of women and the oppression of any other child of God, instead, we *embrace* respect, protection, and affirmation of women in our families, communities, workplaces, politics and churches.
- 3) If we believe that how we treat the hungry... the stranger, the sick and the prisoner is how we treat Christ himself...then we reject the language and policies of political leaders who would debase and abandon the most vulnerable. Instead, we will embrace the calls for basic human rights for all.
- 4) If we believe that truth-telling is central to the prophetic biblical tradition and a moral imperative...then we reject the practice of lying that is invading our political and civil life. Instead, we embrace the ninth commandment to not bear false witness and remember the words of Jesus, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Speaking truth to power is what Jesus did on that Palm Sunday so long ago.
- 5) If we believe that Christ's Way of leadership is servanthood, not domination, then we reject moves toward autocratic political leadership and authoritarian rule that threatens democracy and the common good. Rather, we embrace the idea that our elected officials are called to public service, not public tyranny.
- 6) And lastly, if we believe that Jesus called us to go into all the nations with this Way of love, forgiveness and compassion---then we should reject "America First" and its narrow, nationalistic prerogatives as a theological heresy for followers of Christ. Instead, we would embrace "America Fair" and seek to live as neighbors in a world community.

Jim Wallis... a prophet in our times.

When I thought about this peace march of Jesus, on that Palm Sunday so long ago...marching towards the oppressive power of his own day...I thought of the spiritual that Alice Parker has in her hymnal: Ride On, King Jesus! Jesus making a spoof of Kingship...no army, no white stallion with sword and buckler...no, Jesus rides in on a small colt, with women and children waving palms and praising GOD for this teacher, this Jewish peasant, who pointed the way towards God and how to love one another... This story has given hope for humankind across the centuries.

The spiritual's chorus goes like this: Ride On, King Jesus! No man can a'hinduh me! With the power of this God-given love from which we derive life itself, no one

can stop us...no one can a'hinder us. When Alice leads this song, you can feel the heartbeat...you can imagine the hope rising in the chest of slaves singing this song towards their freedom...and we can imagine the hope for our own times if we could be so brave...to reclaim this powerful love of Christ!

Sing with me: Rise On! King Jesus! No man can a'hinduh me....Ride On! King Jesus! No ma—n can a'hinduh me! Alice, will you lead us in the chorus again?....

Ride on, King Jesus....no man can a'hinduh me! Ride on, King Jesus, no man can a'hinduh me.

May God's infinite and guiding love...fill us all in these times.

Amen.