

Palm Sunday, 2016
The Too-Hard Box
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Years ago, long before the tyranny of email, I worked with a guy who actually had 3 boxes on his desk. There was an inbox, for work that awaited him that day. There was an outbox, where he put completed work ready for pick-up. And then there was the too-hard box. Things went into the too-hard box and never came out, as evidenced by the layer of dust on top of the stack. Today, we have the electronic equivalent on our laptops, but even if we don't use computers much, we probably can relate to that catch-all place where tasks that seem too hard gets filed but never attended to.

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of the holiest week of the Christian calendar. We participate in the whole story – beginning with carrying palm branches and proclaiming, “Hosanna!” and continuing through the Passion Narrative with shouts of “Crucify him!” Each Holy Week, we are confronted by human nature at its ugliest and most brutal. How tempting it is, sometimes, to throw it into the too-hard box and go straight to Easter.

But here we are. And one way to make sense of the crucifixion is to first understand the symbolism of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It references a passage attributed to the prophet Zechariah, though probably written in the 3rd century BC. This prophecy envisions a king, the heir to David's throne, entering Jerusalem not on a warhorse, but on a donkey. His kingdom will be one of peace, such that all nations will look to it as an example. Throughout the gospel of Luke, Jesus adamantly refused to be called King, but instead demonstrated repeatedly what true kingship looks like. He healed the broken and restored them to full life. He forgave those who missed the mark and included them in his new community. He raised people of both high and low status back from death. He was compassionate and restorative in word and action. *This* is how kings and rulers are meant to be. Nothing new here. This has been the vision of the prophets for centuries. What Jesus did was put *this* model of kingship out there for the people of Jerusalem to see.

Luke does not tell us, but we can infer that another very different kind of procession occurred more or less at the same time in another part of Jerusalem. Pilate would have arrived with a retinue of soldiers and guards in a “peace-keeping mission” ahead of Passover. They would have entered Jerusalem from the opposite direction and most assuredly would have been in chariots or on warhorses, as would befit representatives of the conquering empire. Whom will the people ultimately follow – the one who brings peace in the name of the Lord or the one who “brings peace” in the name of Caesar?

We know what happens. The same people who hailed Jesus as King will, in less than a week, call for his death. It is theologically tempting for us to see Jesus as fulfilling a pre-ordained role. After all, Jesus made it clear that he headed to Jerusalem to die. How easy it is to assume that God is offstage somewhere pulling strings to ensure that his only begotten Son gets crucified for our sake, as though nobody, including Jesus himself, had any exercise of free will in these events.

But what if they did? What if instead of a pre-programmed Jesus, we have a living, choosing, inviting Jesus making an offer to the people and powers of Jerusalem? What if the triumphal entry into Jerusalem was the way in for people to see that the healing, compassionate, inclusive reign of God stood in opposition to the sacrificial system that the religious leaders in Jerusalem had to offer? What if the people saw that the kingship that Jesus represented was entirely different from the Imperial power and glory of Rome – imperial power that benefitted a few of Jerusalem's religious elite but oppressed the majority? What it would mean is that the people would then have to make a decision. The kingship that Jesus represented was, and is, costly. It requires the kind of repentance that our gospel passages have explored throughout Lent. It requires us to imagine the kingdom of

God in completely different terms. It required upending the religious systems of the day, which would, in turn dismantle the political and economic hierarchies that worked well for those in power. The last really would be first. The first really would be last. That is what Jesus offered.

And it is an offer that is ultimately rejected, not because the crowd was “scripted” to do so, but because the cost of compassion and of transformation is always seen as too great. It’s too hard.

But Jesus, of course, doesn’t let it go at that. We count the cost of such transformative love and say no. But Jesus did not. In loving his own to the end, he chose to lay down his very life. Not because he was scripted to do so. Not because God intended this from the beginning, but perhaps because the only way to redress our misuse of our free will is for Jesus to use his own differently. To bear what humans do to him – even the worst we can imagine. To reach to the depths, to the hell of human life. Transformatively. Decisively. Lovingly.

What will we do? Take his body into our own hands. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. May he, indeed, grant us his peace.