***CHEERS, TEARS, AND FEARS***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Texts: Luke 19:28-48 and Jeremiah 7:3-11

Someone suggested this week that the title of this sermon – *Cheers, Tears, and Fears* – prefigured a focus upon a certain men’s NCAA basketball championship game Monday night which, in case you haven’t heard, was won by UVA. That was not my intent, as much as I would like to take credit for it, since the title for this sermon was selected in December, long before NCAA Tournament games or even ACC play had begun. That said, *Cheers, Tears, and Fears* is probably an apt description of the range of emotions and responses of players, coaches, and fans alike in that championship game. There were times of great joy, times of great angst, and tears of both joy and sorrow shed in the course of Monday evening, while inconceivably some folks were largely oblivious to the game and its result. In all those respects Monday evening was not unlike that Palm Sunday parade into Jerusalem almost two thousand years ago.

The cheers along the road from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem came from the lips of Jesus’ disciples. While Matthew, Mark, and Luke suggest there was a great crowd lining the road and shouting hosannas, Luke says that it was just a multitude of disciples who were praising God and cheering Jesus. Who were in that multitude? Tax collectors, fishermen, prostitutes, healed lepers, sinners of all shapes and sizes – people who lived at the margins of society or had been cast out completely. It was a ragtag bunch who laid down their coats in the road and shouted hosannas as Jesus rode on the back of a little donkey down from the Mount of Olives and up to the holy city of Jerusalem. “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” they shouted. To the occasional passersby, it must have seemed a strange sight!

What a contrast to the grand entrance of Herod or Caesar when they rode into Jerusalem! They rode on the back of white stallions with a phalanx of Roman soldiers in tow and throngs of people lining the street! Theirs was a parade of great pomp, power, and pageantry worthy of a king! The arrival of Jesus, was more modest, more muted, and not coincidentally, more messianic, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah:

*Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he,*

*humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

Humility, forgiveness, and love characterized this messiah who came in the name of the Lord. Power, persecution and intimidation characterized the kings who rode on white stallions. Herod and Caesar ruled by fear with military might ready to execute their orders – and their opponents. Crucifixion was, for them, the ultimate weapon to deter dissent and silence opponents in a vicious, painful, degrading, public way. Love and forgiveness were the marks of Jesus’ kingdom as described in the words voiced by the disciples lining the road: *Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!*

A kingdom of power grounded in fear, a kingdom of peace grounded in love – that was the stark contrast between the realms of these kings who entered Jerusalem two thousand years ago, and it is the choice that leaders have had to make ever since. Most have opted to follow the examples of Caesar and Herod, amassing military might, wielding power, and torturing opponents to preserve their positions. Think not only of kings and tyrants who have reigned in such cruel fashion, but also of the horrible actions in the name of Christ in the Crusades, Spanish Inquisition, and Salem witch trials. But think too of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela who followed a way more akin to that of Jesus. They are the exceptions; far more have opted for violence, arms, and armies that have produced little peace or harmony. What if we followed Jesus’ example instead of Caesar’s! What if we valued the humility of Jesus riding on the donkey more than the power of those riding white stallions! What if we followed Jesus’ way, that way on display as he rode into Jerusalem to the cheers of adoring disciples.

The cheers belonged to the disciples, but the tears belonged to Jesus. As he neared the city, says Luke, he wept. Only twice in all of the Gospels is Jesus described as weeping –at the death of his friend Lazarus and as he drew near to Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday. The tears at Lazarus’ death we understand; we too weep at the death of dear friends. But why weep in the midst of this parade with the holy city in sight? Why when the hosannas were raining down on him and disciples were hailing him as king and the parade that he had arranged – for recall he was the one who told the disciples to bring the donkey to him – was going so well, why then did he weep? He wept, says Luke, because he knew of the destruction that lay ahead for Jerusalem. He wept because the people still did not understand the things that make for peace. He wept because the people did not recognize his presence among them as a visitation from God. He wept out of love for the city and for its people. Fleming Rutledge suggests, “Jesus did not weep for himself. He weeps for the city. He weeps for those who will soon shout ‘Crucify him!’ In other words he weeps for us.” “Tears are eloquent,” she writes. “Tears speak.”[[1]](#endnote-1) What then did Jesus’ tears say?

They said that he longed for peace. The disciples shouted, “Peace in heaven!” but Jesus longed for peace on earth. The message he preached and modeled was a path to peace – peace among neighbors and peace within individuals. It was peace grounded in the assurance of God’s unending love and persistent presence. It was peace rooted in love and forgiveness of neighbors and enemies alike. It was peace that embraced a way of life that sought much more than the absence of violence; it sought *shalom:* healing and wholeness and hope for the future. “If only you had recognized the things that make for peace!” he murmured. “If only…”

I can’t help but wonder whether the risen Christ looks down upon us and sheds yet more tears and murmurs again, “If only they recognized the things that make for peace.”

Does the risen Christ see the carnage in Syria and shed a tear?

Does he see the destruction in Yemen and shed another?

Does he see the shootings in South Carolina, Pittsburgh, and New Zealand and shed more tears?

Does he see the violence in Central America that drives refugees from their homes and homelands and see children separated from their parents at our border and shed yet more tears?

Does he look down upon us all with divine tears streaming down his cheeks and murmur, “If only they recognized the things that make for peace?”

When will we learn those things? When will we practice those things? When will we stop causing Jesus to weep?

Perhaps it would make a difference if we too wept at those tragedies instead of resigning ourselves to them, if we empathized with the suffering instead of growing indifferent to it, if we recognized the things that make for peace and lived into those things and demanded of our government and our communities and our world and ourselves, policies and practices that made for the kind of peace Jesus showed us rather than the false peace of Herod and Caesar. Perhaps it would make a difference if we spent as much time, effort, and resources working for peace as we do waging war. Perhaps…

But then there are the fears. The fears that first Palm Sunday belonged to the religious leaders. The Pharisees worried that the shouts of hosanna and blessings upon the king who came in the name of the Lord would bring down the wrath of Rome upon them. The *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace, tolerated little ruckus from the locals, especially anything that hinted at insurrection. The Pharisees feared that this little parade might be perceived as such an event and result in the heavy hand of Rome coming down on all of them. So, they begged Jesus to silence the disciples, to end this ragtag parade and keep the peace. But Jesus did nothing to calm their fears, nothing to satisfy their demands, nothing to stop his disciples; he told the Pharisees that even if the crowd fell silent, the stones would cry out. For, there was something bigger in this event than a parade; there was a royal statement being made about who Jesus was: the one coming in the name of the Lord, the Messiah of God!

The fears of the Jewish leaders grew as Jesus entered the city, went into the temple, and drove out the moneychangers and salespeople, citing words from the prophet Jeremiah: *My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers*. It was his indictment of the religious establishment, an accusation that they had shirked their duties, a claim of greater authority than they held as chief priests, scribes and leaders of the people. It was not Jesus those leaders feared – they could deal with him; it was the crowd. They feared that any action they took against Jesus would result in a riot, for the people embraced Jesus’ message and, in Luke’s words, “hung upon his words.” Those who seemingly held the power were afraid for themselves!

That was that first Palm Sunday. How quickly things would change in the days that followed! They too would be marked by cheers, tears, and fears, but the characters would change. Disciples who cheered Jesus’ ride into Jerusalem would soon be shedding tears at his crucifixion, betray him, and huddle in fear that they might be next to be nailed to a cross. The religious leaders who so feared the wrath of Rome and the crowd would arrest Jesus by night and then urge a crowd friendlier to them to cheer, “Crucify him!” And the figure at the center of it all – the one who rode into town on the back of a donkey, the one who wept for the city and its people, the one who turned over the tables in the temple, the one who the crowd proclaimed to be the king who came in the name of the Lord – would be arrested, mocked, beaten, and crucified between two thieves under a sign reading, “King of the Jews.” For, they did not understand the things that make for peace; they did not recognize their visitation from God in the person of Jesus the Christ. If only they did – but they didn’t. Do you? Amen

1. Fleming Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing:2002, p.6, 8 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)