

“Preaching Lent and Easter”
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Lecture I. *Lessons from the First Holy Week for Preaching in Lent*
Finding Hope Again for the First Time

I’m feeling the pressure from my students in the audience who expect me to provide ideas for five sermons! Is that all? I’ll do my best!

Actually, your task is more intimidating: to preach words of hope at a time when many are living under the dark cloud of despair, tragic loss of epic proportions, loss so up close and personal that emotions ambush and leave us in a pool of tears; to preach words of hope when many are outraged at the magnitude of poverty, hunger, and disease in a country so close to our own affluent backyard; to preach words of hope that raise up more witnesses like Ben Larson¹ to God’s love for the poorest of the poor; to preach words of hope that open hearts, wallets, and checkbooks to the great needs in Haiti and other nations among the poorest of the poor.

As intimidating as that might sound, someone, in fact many preachers, perhaps some of you, have already preached such words of hope. God has already given us the words of hope we need at “such a time as this” (Esther 4.14).² In addition to *words of hope*—plural and lowercase—in the scriptures, God has given us *the Word of hope*—singular and uppercase—Jesus Christ. In the time we have together today, I invite you to hear words of hope “again for the first time,” and to meet the Word of hope “again for the first time.” I thank Marcus Borg for that phrase and wish I had thought of it myself! For it directs us to the opportunity, the need, to listen to familiar words of hope with fresh ears, and to encounter Jesus, the Word of hope, again, as if for the first time.

We begin with Lent. What clues can we discover in the “first Lenten season” for our journey toward “Holy Week”? What was Jesus’ journey toward “the first Holy Week” like? A traditional answer, perhaps the most popular, is that it was a journey toward the death God intended him to die “for us”: the journey of a “dead man walking,” so to speak. Some Christians find hope in that scenario. However, it doesn’t speak to many *within* our churches, as well as to many who have *left* our churches, who cannot make sense of it. For some, mostly women, this scenario lends support to those who have abused them: by valorizing suffering and death as Jesus’ divinely ordained mission, the church has made suffering the lot God portions out to all of us, but especially to the abused and to those who are subject to economic and political injustice.³

I want to say up front that I sympathize with those who dissent from this traditional interpretation of Jesus’ story. I believe the Gospels also testify against it. Jesus’ journey toward “the first Holy Week” was his mission, his “first passion,” so to speak, to proclaim *God’s justice* “on earth as in heaven”! Let’s focus on that during Lent. Let’s lament how the injustice of nations and abusers continue to wreck havoc in the world. Let’s celebrate that *God’s justice* continues to break through the world’s systems of

¹ Here is an excerpt from “The Life of Ben Larson” (<http://www.flcduluth.org/>): “Benjamin Judd Ulring Splichal Larson, 25, died in the earthquake in Haiti on January 12, 2010. Ben, his wife, Renee Splichal Larson, and his cousin, Jonathan Larson, all three Wartburg Theological Seminary students certified for ordination, were in Haiti learning from and walking with the people of the Eglise Luthérienne d’Haiti (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Haiti). Renee and Jon were able to escape after the top two floors of a six floor building of the St. Joseph’s Home for Boys (up the mountain from Port-au-Prince) collapsed upon them all. Ben was buried in the collapsed ceiling on the resurrection dance theater floor and died after singing a verse of a hymn.”

² Quotations from scripture are adapted from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

³ See, e.g., Barbara E. Reid, *Taking Up the Cross: New Testament Interpretations Through Latina and Feminist Eyes* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

injustice. It is fitting that the “first season of Lent” in the story of Jesus ends with the joy and hope of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. Let’s see how Lent can again become again a season of lament and the rediscovery of hope.

I have chosen to cast these lectures as explorations of what we can learn from “the first Holy Week” about hope during Lent, good news on Good Friday, and faith on Easter. So, let’s begin with a review of “the first Holy Week.”⁴ This will give us a view of the “big picture,” the larger interpretive context for the lectionary readings. In the following, I am reflecting the wave of studies of Jesus and Paul in the context of the Roman Empire, and in the context of more contemporary empires.⁵

The first day of Holy Week used to be called Palm Sunday. Recently it has been renamed “Passion Sunday” in many churches. I can understand some practical reasons for this change. Since many Christians will not participate in Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Passion Saturday services, we have to front-load the story of Jesus’ “passion” on the Sunday before Easter. Otherwise, many Christians will hear only about the victory of Jesus’ resurrection without any of his suffering and death. That points to another reason for this change: as a celebration of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Palm Sunday is in danger of being cut off from his suffering and death. Nevertheless, I propose that we need to meet Jesus on *Palm Sunday* “again for the first time”! For it is there where we see clearly that Jesus was a “dead man walking,” not because God wanted him to be *killed* “for us,” but because his “triumphal entry” into Jerusalem was a parody of the Romans’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem: it was an anti-war demonstration, a challenge to imperial injustice, a proclamation of God’s justice “on earth as in heaven”!

On the second day of “the *first* Holy Week,” Jesus’ curse destroyed a fig tree as a prophetic act announcing the temple’s destruction for its collusion with imperial injustice (Mk 11.12-14). Worship was supposed to proclaim *God’s justice* “on earth as in heaven”; instead, temple worship was serving *Roman law and order*, with its violence, taxes, and widespread injustice against the poor. Jesus’ action in the temple on that day (Mk 11.15-19) was directed, not against *Judaism*, but against the temple authorities who were in collusion with Roman authorities occupying Palestine. Jesus’ problem with the temple was not that it excluded gentiles: Herod had already expanded the temple mount with a “court of the gentiles,” signaling that “the nations” were welcome to worship the God of Israel. The problem was that temple authorities ensured their positions of power in the Roman domination system by helping the Romans maintain law and order and collect taxes—further indication that the “first Lenten season” was, for Jesus, the journey of a “dead man walking,” not because God sent him to *die* “for us,” but because Jesus was resolutely passionate that *God’s justice* must come “on earth as in heaven.”

The third day of “the first Holy Week” consisted of continued controversies with religious leaders. A parable about greedy tenant farmers was addressed to temple authorities (Mk 12.1-12). The authorities tried to trap him with a question about paying Roman taxes (Mk 12.13-17). An otherwise innocent question about resurrection (Mk 12.18-27) is not so innocent when it is asked by aristocratic Sadducees, whose life was so good that they could proclaim, “God is good all the time, all the time God is good”; they had no need for resurrection, when God would set right the injustices suffered by the poor. For Jesus, the double love-command—love God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as yourself—defined what living in the kingdom of God was like (Mk 12.28-34). Jesus again confronted the economic injustice of the temple authorities whose tax collection extracted all that widows have: the “widow’s mite” was not a symbol of sacrificial giving but a tax that was part of the exploitation and robbery of the poorest of the poor (Mk 12.35-44). Immediately after that, Jesus repeated his prophecy of the temple’s destruction (Mk 13.1-4), followed by prophecies of deliverance after more suffering (Mk 13.5-37). On the third day of “the first Holy Week,” Jesus continued to demonstrate that he was a “dead man walking” on behalf of the coming of *God’s justice* “on earth as in heaven.”

⁴ For the next section of this lecture, compare Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: The Day-by-Day Account of Jesus’s Final Week in Jerusalem* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

⁵ Richard A. Horsley and Warren Carter are two leaders of this wave of studies. Also see Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire*, Paul in Critical Contexts (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

The fourth day of “the first Holy Week” was a day for an act of faithful discipleship and its opposite, an act of betrayal. The woman who anointed Jesus for burial before his crucifixion (Mk 14.3-9) understood that Jesus’ proclamation of the good news of God’s justice, in words and deeds, would lead to his death at the hands of the powerful. The disciples, at least in Mark, never understood that, and one of them, for reasons unknown, decided to turn Jesus over to those who would eventually hand him over to be crucified by the Romans (Mk 14.1-2, 10-11). In Mark’s story of Jesus, the “first Lenten season” was a time for Jesus to instruct his disciples that the proclamation of God’s justice “on earth as in heaven” would lead to his death at the hands of “the nations/gentiles.” Let’s pause to review Jesus’ instructions to his disciples from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem.

The 1st “passion prediction” (Mk 8.27-38) comes after Peter’s exuberant acclamation, “You are the Messiah”! Then Jesus warned them as plainly as he could that he would suffer violence and rejection at the hands of the temple authorities and be killed. He said nothing about a mission to die “for us.” When Peter “rebuked” him, Jesus “rebuked” him right back with words that showed Peter had a different future in mind for Jesus, something “satanic” and “human.”⁶ Was it something more like the world’s justice, at the point of a sword (Jn 18.10; compare Mk 14.47)? Did he expect Jesus to lead the disciples, as a band of insurgents against Roman occupation, or at least against the temple authorities in collusion with the Romans? We aren’t told, but the story of Jesus’ arrest is consistent with the arrest of insurgents (Mk 14.43-52). Jesus’ instructions to his disciples show the alternative Jesus had in mind: Jesus’ true disciples will be prepared for the powerful to put them to death for proclaiming God’s justice “on earth as in heaven.”

The 2nd “passion prediction” (Mk 9.30-37) shows the disciples again failing to understand that Jesus’ passion for God’s justice “on earth as in heaven” would lead him to the cross.⁷ They were more interested in becoming the “greatest.” Jesus’ alternative is “to be first” you must “be last of all and a servant of all.” Again, Jesus said nothing about dying “for us.”

The 3rd “passion prediction” (Mk 10.32-45) is addressed to disciples who were “afraid” as they approached Jerusalem. This “prediction” is the longest, and it parallels, bit by bit, Mark’s narrative of Jesus’ arrest, “trials,” and crucifixion. As with the second “prediction,” the disciples show they were more interested in gaining positions of power as spoils of victory.⁸ Jesus made them face reality: if they remain faithful to God’s justice “on earth as in heaven,” they too will have to drink from the “cup” of martyrdom. Jesus repeated his alternative vision of God’s justice “on earth as in heaven.” Jesus said they must not rule like tyrannical Caesars, who claimed the status of “first citizen” and who enslaved those over whom they ruled: if they want to be the “greatest citizen,” they must be a “servant”; and if they want to be the “first citizen,” they must be a “slave of all.”

This final “passion prediction” ends with what many have interpreted as Jesus’ understanding of his servanthood as one of “substitutionary sacrifice:” “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom [*lytron*] for many” (Mk 10.45).⁹ Let me deal briefly with five elements of this saying.

1. The second and third “passion predictions” define true discipleship as servanthood, so that here Jesus’ servanthood parallels that of the disciples. Their common servanthood also seems to define the term traditionally translated as “ransom.” It is unlikely that the disciples were also to “serve” as a “substitutionary sacrifice,” so that this term either adds a dimension to Jesus’ “service” that uniquely

⁶ Since Luke is the Gospel of the year, it’s important to note that Luke didn’t like Mark’s portrait of the disciples, especially Peter, and omits this part of the narrative (Lk 9.18-22).

⁷ Luke softens Mark’s criticism of the disciples by saying that Jesus’ “meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it” (Lk 9.45).

⁸ Luke moves the dispute about being “the greatest” to the Last Supper (Lk 22.24-30), where Jesus actually grants the request that Mark has the disciples make of Jesus!

⁹ In Luke, which omits this saying (22.26-27), Jesus’ death is all about Jesus, not “us,” since it is his “exodus” (9.31). For the disciples, was not the “saving event”; it was the end of their hope that he would “redeem” (*lytroō*) Israel (24.21). In Luke, the “saving event” was Jesus’ continued presence among the disciples after his crucifixion and his ascension into “heaven” (Luke 24 and the book of Acts).

applies to him, or it is meant to be synonymous with being a servant and slave of all. Or, perhaps Jesus' substitutionary sacrifice was not supposed to be unique.

2. The most common use of the preposition *anti* would mean "to give his life as a 'ransom' *instead or in place of many*," but here it could also be equivalent to the preposition *hyper* ("to give his life as a 'ransom' *on behalf of many*").¹⁰ The meaning of "*on behalf of many*" is not "*in the place of many*" but "*for the benefit of many*."
3. The phrase "to give his life" refers to Jesus' death as his martyrdom—his willing, voluntary *witness* to the point of death. In his death, as in his life, he bore witness to God's justice "on earth as in heaven." That's how he served "many," both in life and in death.
4. The term "many" is not restrictive, as if it meant "to give his life as a 'ransom' for *some but not all*"; rather, it is equivalent to "all": "to give his life as a 'ransom' for *all*."¹¹ And we know that "all means all": not just Christians, or believers, or good people, but all people.
5. Finally, the term *lytron* belongs to a word-group that has to do with emancipation, liberation, freedom. This particular term is used for the means by which emancipation is achieved, a payment of some sort: money or some other material commodity, or, in some contexts, a person or a person's death. 2 Macc 7.9, 18, 23, 32,¹² 37-38¹³ and 4 Macc 17.20-22¹⁴ are often cited in favor of the interpretation of *lytron* in Mk 10.45 as a "ransom *for the sins of many*." But note the following: (a) Instead of the term *lytron*, these texts use the terms *antipsychon* and *hilastērion*. (b) The seven martyred sons died as much for the sake of God's *laws* as for their own *sins* and those of their nation. (c) The "benefit" of their martyrdoms for their nation was *religious*—"atonement" (*hilastērion*), which is interpreted as the cleansing of their homeland from sin and propitiation, the appeasement of God's wrath—and it was *political*—liberation from foreign domination and punishment of their enemies. (d) Mark also does not name the one to whom a "ransom" was paid. This could be an instance of an implied reference to God, though some atonement theories say that it was paid to Satan. If we leave this gap without filling it in, the term *lytron* simply signifies the means by which emancipation is achieved. (e) Mark does not name that because of which Jesus' "gave his life *as a ransom*," except to say it was "for many." Whereas in Mark witnessing to God's forgiveness of sin is Jesus' mission,¹⁵ it is never mentioned in connection with Jesus' death.¹⁶ Jesus did not have to die as a condition of God's forgiveness of sins. Mark knew that Jesus knew that God had always forgiven the sins of "many/all," and that God would keep on forgiving their sins. Perhaps 2 and 4 Maccabees provide a clue to Jesus' "ransom-death" after all: his death became a means by which "many/all" were emancipated from rulers, it was *religious and political*. That, at any rate, is how Luke thought of Jesus. Jesus was supposed to *liberate* Israel, through his life, not his death (Lk 24.21). His death was the result of imperial resistance to his mission to liberate Israel, a mission that would continue after his "departure" in death to ascend to heaven; from there he would send the Spirit upon the disciples to

¹⁰ See BDAG *anti* 3. Compare Mk 14.24.

¹¹ See "all" in Mk 9.35.

¹² Seven sons died "for the sake of [*hyper* with the genitive and *dia* with the accusative] God's laws" or "our own sins";

¹³ The seven martyred sons handed over/gave up [*prodidōmi*] "body and soul for [*peri*] the laws of our ancestors ... and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation."

¹⁴ Speaking of the seven martyred sons, "These, then, who have been consecrated for the sake of God, are honored, not only with this honor, but also by the fact that because of them our enemies did not rule over our nation,²¹ the tyrant was punished, and the homeland purified—they having become, as it were, a ransom [*antipsychon* followed by the genitive] for the sin of our nation.²² And through [*dia* with the genitive] the blood of those devout ones and their death as an atoning sacrifice [*tou hilastēriou tou thanatou autōn*], divine Providence preserved Israel that previously had been mistreated."

¹⁵ Mk 1.4; 2.5, 7, 9-10; 3.28-29; 4.12; and 11.25.

¹⁶ Luke, like Mark, never associates forgiveness of sins with Jesus' death. Compare Mt 26.28.

continue as Jesus' witnesses from Jerusalem "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1.6-8): that is, to all nations (Lk 24.45-53). I will return to these issues in my second lecture.

The next day in "the first Holy Week" is traditionally called Maundy Thursday, which comes from John's Gospel, where Jesus' long "farewell" speech to his disciples the night before Passover introduces a "mandate," a "new commandment," to love one another as Jesus loved them (chs. 13-17). The Johannine community needed this "new commandment," because it had been expelled from the local synagogue, in a dispute about the relationship between Jesus and Moses. In John's Gospel, Jesus does not eat the Passover meal with his disciples, because, unlike the other Gospels, where Jesus is killed after the Passover meal, John has Jesus' crucifixion occur on the night when the Passover lamb was to be slaughtered. The view of believers in Jesus, that Jesus was the Passover lamb, to be slaughtered and then served up in the Passover Seder, was understandably distasteful to the other members of the synagogue! Jesus' death and resurrection are portrayed as a defiant challenge to Roman authorities. Jesus' death and resurrection also show up the collusion of the temple authorities with the Romans. Mark portrays preparations for Jesus' Passover meal with his disciples as a "covert operation" (Mk 14.12-16), just like preparations for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Mk 11.1-11); and Mark interprets Jesus' death as his martyrdom "for many" (Mk 14.17-25). I'll say more about that in my second lecture. For now, I'll simply say that the fifth day of "the first Holy Week" continues to reflect the religious and political themes of the first four days. That becomes clearer in the story of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane (Mk 14.32-42)¹⁷ and his arrest and trials (Mk 14.43-72).¹⁸ The scene in Gethsemane, at night in a secluded place far from the public's eyes, looks like an arrest of the leader of a band of insurgents. I will say more about that in my second lecture, when I will also say something about "Good Friday" and "Passion Saturday," the sixth and seventh days of "the first Holy Week." My third lecture is about "Easter Sunday," the last day.

The point of this review of "the first Holy Week" is to keep in mind where the Lenten season is headed and to keep the two connected. All too often congregations are given the impression that Jesus' story before the events of Holy Week has little or no connection with the last week of Jesus' life. If Jesus' last week played out God's plan to have Jesus killed for our sins, what was the use of Jesus' public ministry before the last week? Why wait 30 years? Why not have him killed for our sins as a baby, as Matthew says Herod tried to do? No! Jesus' public ministry of wise teaching, compassionate healing, and inclusive fellowship with outcasts announced, dramatized, and made real God's kingdom/justice "on earth as in heaven." That was the "plan" that God wanted Jesus to play out in his last week as in the rest of his life!

John's Gospel gets it exactly right. From the very beginning, he lets us know that Jesus' "zeal," his first passion, for God's "house" will "consume" him (Jn 2.17).¹⁹ Jesus insisted that worship of God should lead to enacting God's justice "on earth as in heaven." His last week demonstrated his faithfulness to speak out against the temple's collusion with injustice and the Roman occupation of Palestine. It demonstrated his life-long obedience, even to the point of death, to bringing God's justice "on earth as in heaven."

With that overview in mind, I want to make some brief comments on selected Lenten lections:

1. Ash Wednesday

Isa 58.1-12 challenges us to examine our worship, our rituals, even the imposition of ashes, our spiritual disciplines, our very spirituality, in the light of God's call for justice for the homeless and the poor. How can we mark our foreheads with the ashes of Jesus' cross and not accompany the homeless and the poor in the struggle for God's justice "on earth as in heaven"?

Ps 51.1-17 helps us ask God for mercy, since we have all fallen short of God's call for justice "on earth as in heaven." It also reminds us that asking for mercy and saying we are sorry aren't enough. The imposition of ashes from Jesus' cross marks us, not just as forgiven people, but as participants in Jesus'

¹⁷ Compare Lk 22.39-46 and Jn 12.27.

¹⁸ Compare Lk 22.47-71 and Jn 18.1-19.42.

¹⁹ Compare Ps 68.10.

passion for God's justice. This psalm reminds us that such rituals ought to be transformative. It invites us to examine how God is calling us to be transformed to serve God in today's world.

2 Cor 5.20b-6.10 describes the same "cost of discipleship" that the imposition of ashes symbolizes. Faithful discipleship is daunting. A text like this does not make a great sales pitch for Christian discipleship! And yet, it gives us a reality check: ashes of Jesus' cross do not promise disciples an easy ride! They do promise us God's righteousness, reconciliation, and justice as strength for the rocky road we trod. The ashes on our foreheads remind us that Jesus accompanies us on the way.

Mt 6.1-6, 16-21 chops out the most important clue to true piety! True piety reflects the Lord's Prayer: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6.10). True piety is asking God for enough daily food for everyone and being moved to say, "Here am I, send me to feed the hungry." True piety is being an instrument of forgiveness and reconciliation in a world of strife—in communities, schools, workplaces, churches, and families wracked with strife.

2. 1st Sunday in Lent

Rom 10.8b-13 offers the preacher several themes:

- (a) The "Word" is "near." This is the uppercase and singular Word: Jesus Christ is "the Word of faith that we proclaim." The lectionary cuts out the section that talks about how we do not need to go to heaven or to the dead to find Christ (Rom 10.6-7). That's important, because many Christians think they have to die and go to heaven to be "saved." Here Paul states clearly that salvation in Christ is for here and now.
- (b) God's salvation is for "all." The problem is that Paul wrote that "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Doesn't that mean salvation is only for confessing Christians? But Paul also quoted Isa 28.16: "No one who believes in him [that is, God] will be put to shame." And Joel 2.32: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord [that is, God] shall be saved." Also, remember that this section of Romans begins with "the righteousness that comes from faith says..." (Rom 10.6). For Paul, a monotheistic Jew, that means faith in *God*.
- (c) Confessing that "Jesus is Lord" and believing that "God raised him from the dead" are not two things added to putting one's full faith in God. To say that Jesus, crucified under Roman imperial law, is "Lord" is to affirm that God is the ultimate ruler of the world, not the Romans and their gods. To believe that God raised the crucified Jesus from the dead is to trust that God is the ruler of the world, not the Romans and their power to kill.

3. 2nd Sunday in Lent

Lk 13.31-35 contains at least four possible themes for preachers:

- (a) Why would Herod Antipas—Herod the Great's son in the Galilee—want to kill Jesus? John the Baptist publicly challenged Herod's marriage to Herodias, Herod's half-brother's wife, as a political move to expand his land and power—a challenge that cost John his head. Jesus, a former disciple of John the Baptist, had become a leader of a popular movement in the Galilee. He sounded like he was continuing John the Baptist's politically charged message of the coming of God's rule "on earth as in heaven." So, why would some Pharisees want to warn Jesus? Did they support Jesus' message and movement? Or did they warn him so that Jesus would abandon his message and shut down his movement? It's hard to tell. What would we like to say to Jesus in the face of this imperial threat?
- (b) How would telling "that fox" that Jesus would continue "casting out demons and performing cures" pose a challenge to Herod Antipas? We might not think of medical professionals today as political activists, but in Jesus' day successful itinerant healers—and Jesus seemed to have been one of them—could attract a popular following with political power. Also, there is a prophetic dimension to "casting out demons and performing cures," which signals God's triumph over powers of injustice—God's kingdom/justice coming "on earth as in heaven." That's also the significance of finishing this work "on the third day": the day when God's salvation traditionally

appears. Where do we see God's salvation in today's world? Where do we see it confronting powers of injustice in our world?

- (c) Jerusalem, the holy city, the city of God, is also the city where prophets are killed. Jesus is not the first of Israel's prophets to be killed in Jerusalem. But, instead of condemning Jerusalem, Jesus laments its injustice, violence, and unwillingness to listen to Israel's prophets. We can learn something from Jesus' lament as an alternative to the tendency to condemn those who reject prophets and their messages, and as an alternative to responding to violence with more violence. Besides, we might be more like the Jerusalemites than we would like to admit.

4. 4th Sunday in Lent

2 Cor 5.16-21 speaks about viewing others from the perspective of God, who has "reconciled the world in and through Christ" and does not "count their trespasses against them." Roman imperial justice maintained order by harshly punishing "transgressors." Jesus preached and acted out a radical alternative to this retributive form of justice. In its place was the transformative justice of reconciliation in God's kingdom "on earth as in heaven." During Lent we might lament the many ways the world's retributive justice continues to count other's "trespasses" against them. We might rejoice that, in Christ, God has made each person a "new creation." We might spend time meditating on "the ministry of reconciliation" that God has given us and imagining what it means to be "ambassadors for Christ" in our communities and in the world.

Lk 15.1-3, 11-32 is so familiar it is difficult to read it "again for the first time." One way to read it with fresh eyes is to read it in the context of Jesus' demonstration against the dominant retributive system of justice, which is what got him in trouble with Jewish and Roman authorities. By welcoming sinners, including the hated tax collectors, and eating with them, Jesus dramatized the transformative justice of reconciliation in God's kingdom "on earth as in heaven." Another approach to reading it "again for the first time" is to read it in the context of our churches and lament that too often they are places where "elder sons" grumble about "those sinners," and then ask how they can become places where even the worst among sinners are welcome, and where transformative reconciliation is nurtured.

5. Palm/Passion Sunday (6th Sunday in Lent)

Lk 19.28-40 pictures Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as a political demonstration! To keep peace during Passover, whose message of liberation from slavery has proven to be provocative under foreign occupation, Roman armies entered Jerusalem in a show of force, parading the military might of the empire. Jesus enters with symbols of its anti-type: a humble, anti-war "king!"²⁰ The imperial army proclaimed the divine right of the Caesars to rule the world; Jesus proclaimed God's rule of the world. In the next pericope, Jesus laments the destruction that would come from the use of violence to overturn the Roman occupation (Lk 19.41-44). Then Jesus protests the use of the temple to harbor robbers of the poor and Zealots (Lk 19.45-48).²¹ So, let's celebrate Jesus, the anti-war king who rode into Jerusalem on "the first Palm Sunday," calling everyone to worship in ways that bring the peace and justice of God "on earth as in heaven."

Phil 2.5-11 is a parody of the apotheosis of the Caesars. The Roman Senate declared Caesar Augustus a god. Successive Caesars, as his descendants, called themselves, or were called, sons of a god. Most were declared a god upon or after their deaths. The Emperor Claudius, who is reputed to have banished Jews from Rome, was proclaimed a god by his successor, Nero, and the Senate immediately upon his death in October of 54 C.E., in what some think was the result of an assassination plot to put Nero on the throne. Nero, the Roman Emperor during Paul's missionary journeys and martyrdom, was called a son of a god during his lifetime and was declared a god upon his death (a suicide). According to Roman

²⁰ Luke replaces Mark's "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" (Mk 11.9) with "Blessed is the king who comes..." (Lk 19.38). This image echoes Zech 9.9.

²¹ The Greek term *lēstēs* refers to robbers and insurgents. Contrast Mk 11.15-18, where this event occurs on the next day, and Jn 2.12-22, where it occurs at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. In his history of the Jewish revolt, Josephus, a contemporary of Luke's author, blames temple authorities for turning the temple into a hideout for Zealots/insurgents.

imperial theology, the gods granted the Romans imperial rule over the world because of the Caesars' superior virtue and piety ("righteousness" and "faith"). The theology of the Philippians "hymn" contrasts radically with this imperial theology. This Christ is the opposite of the Caesars. Instead of exploiting his divine status, he gives it up. Instead of ruling as the "first citizen" (*princeps*), he became an obedient slave, and even died the death of slave on a Roman cross. The apotheosis of this crucified slave was God's own act, not an act of any human council. The Caesars sought to keep law and order with violence, but God made this Jesus, crucified by Caesar's representatives, the Lord of the universe, so that all deities and creatures, even the Caesars, might come to recognize Jesus' lordship. Whereas the Caesars ruled through domination and violence, Jesus' lordship is one of solidarity with the least. In fact, God identified with the crucified Jesus, not with tyrants. This "Christ-hymn" shows that Jesus' "first passion," we might say his "Lenten passion," and God's passion, is not suffering and death, but *solidarity with the least*, to the point of death, even death on a cross.

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