

## “Going Up to Jerusalem”

Luke 19:28-40

“Jesus went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.” What is Jerusalem?

In our Old Testament, Jerusalem was the home of the monarchy and aristocracy, of wealth and power. Jerusalem became the center of injustice and of betrayal of God’s covenant. God’s passion for justice had been replaced by human injustice.

The Old Testament prophet, Micah, comes down hard on Jerusalem and it’s wealthy inhabitants. “Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not know justice? – you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones . . . Hear this, you rulers . . . who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! (3:1-2, 9-10)

Today in our context, Micah would say, “Listen, you heads of the Supreme Court and rulers of the House of Representatives and Senate! Should you not know justice? – you who hate the good of our working people and love the evil of bank and Wall Street CEO’s, who love the evil of corporate lobbyists filling your coffers. You who ignore overcrowded homeless shelters and hungry children. You who spend more on war than on our schools and our children’s education. You who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones . . . Hear this you rulers . . . who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build America with blood and Washington D.C. with wrong!”

Do you think Micah made the wealthy rulers in Jerusalem uncomfortable? In the same

8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the prophet Isaiah indicted the rulers of Jerusalem as “rulers of Sodom” and its inhabitants as “people of Gomorrah,” two ancient cities legendary for their injustice.

Isaiah’s language is shocking and harsh.

“How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her – but now murderers! Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow’s cause does not come before them.”

A couple of centuries later, Jeremiah sounds the same theme . . . “Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem. Look around and take note! Search its squares and see if you can find one person who acts justly and seeks truth . . . Has this temple, which is called by God’s name, become a den of robbers? This is the city that must be punished; there is nothing but oppression within her.”

Yet those same prophets do hold up Jerusalem as a city of hope for the future. Isaiah prophecies: “In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of mountains and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, ‘Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that God may teach us God’s ways and that we may walk in God’s path! For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

Micah prophecies a world of peace. “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they

learn war anymore. They shall sit out under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.”

These are images of justice, prosperity, and security. Justice: everyone will have their own land. Prosperity: vines and fig trees means plenty to eat and good health. Security: they will not have to live in a state of constant fear. And the creation of this world of justice and peace, in which fear will be no more, will come from the God whose dwelling place is Jerusalem.

But it was the prophet’s warnings and not their hope that came to pass. First the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem. Then the Persians ruled over them. Then there was Rome and their man Herod, who was ruthless. Anyone who opposed him was killed, including his own family members. Because he ruled from Jerusalem, the city’s buildings became magnificent. He rebuilt the temple to make it bigger and better than any other in the Roman Empire. He built a huge palace for himself with a dining room with enough couches to seat 300 guests.

On the Mediterranean coast, Herod built a huge, all weather port with a state-of-the-art city name Caesarea. He built fortresses for himself on Masada, in Jericho, and other towns. All of this cost a lot of money. In addition to paying for his building projects and his lifestyle, he was responsible for collecting and paying annual tribute to Rome. Herod needed money which meant he needed land.

In order to accumulate land, the wealthy and Herod had to subvert the laws about land in

the Old Testament. Among those laws was one that said agricultural land could not be bought or sold. The reason for the law was to try to ensure that every family would always have its own plot of land to grow the basic foods to feed themselves. So land could only be acquired by confiscation which happened two ways.

The king could confiscate land for his royal estates or more commonly, land was acquired through foreclosure because of debt. The land could be used as collateral for a loan and then when the loan wasn't repaid, the land was confiscated. In Jesus' first century, peasant families couldn't afford to pay their taxes, especially in a bad crop year, mortgaged their land that had been in their family for generations, and lost it to Herod or his wealthy elites. Farmers might be allowed to stay on their own land as tenants or sharecroppers but could no longer grow vegetables and grains to feed their families, being forced to grow more specialized crops like figs and dates for export. Families now had to buy the basics to survive.

During Jesus' life there was an explosion of large estates, displaced peasants, and a concentration of wealth in Jerusalem. The conditions of peasant life were worsening. More people were ill and infant mortality was rising because of malnutrition. Yet these same people flocked to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover Festival by going to the temple and using what little money they had to purchase birds or lambs to be sacrificed for their sins. Not to mention those like the widow who are too poor to purchase an animal and so she faithfully drops her last coins into the collection plate in the temple.

This is the Jerusalem that Jesus entered on Palm Sunday.

The Jesus procession was a peasant procession, while on the other side of the city there was an imperial procession. Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the Kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class. They had journeyed to Jerusalem from Galilee, about a hundred miles to the north. Jesus' time had now arrived.

On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus' procession proclaimed the Kingdom of God. Pilate's procession proclaimed the power of the empire.

Jesus knew his procession was deliberately countering what was happening on the other side of the city. Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory, and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus' procession embodied a different vision – the Kingdom of God.

The confrontation between these two kingdoms continues through the last week of Jesus' life. The week ends with Jesus' execution by the powers who ruled his world. Holy Week is the story of this confrontation. When Jesus got off the donkey, this is what happened in Luke 19:41-48 . . . <sup>41</sup>As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, <sup>42</sup>saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. <sup>43</sup>Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. <sup>44</sup>They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God." <sup>45</sup>Then he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there; <sup>46</sup>and he said, "It

is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer'; but you have made it a den of robbers."

<sup>47</sup>Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; <sup>48</sup>but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.

May the peace of God . . .

#346 - Ride on, Ride On in Majesty!