

MAYFLOWER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
3901 NORTHWEST 63RD STREET  
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK 73116  
REV. DR. ROBIN R. MEYERS, SENIOR MINISTER  
405-842-8897  
cyasunday@mayflowerucc.org  
www.mayflowerucc.org  
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## **SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER**

Holy week has arrived, and tomorrow is the beginning of Passover, and the two have more in common than you might think. All over the world today, the palms are being waved and shouts of Hosanna are ringing through great cathedrals and simple one-room country churches alike – but these traditions developed decades after the death of Jesus, including the waving of palms, which isn't mentioned until John's gospel, near the end of the first century. Why?

Because scholars of the Bible have long known that the passion narratives were created by the writer of Mark's gospel some 40 years after the death of Jesus. The first followers of Jesus believed he was coming back any day, and when "any day" became several decades, and then the temple was destroyed when Jerusalem was sacked in 70 C.E., the church had to figure out how to prepare for a longer stay on earth, and to persuade more Jews that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah.

So they went into the synagogues and poured over the Hebrew scriptures, the law and the prophets, and what they were looking for were clues that predicted the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. Usually, we find what we go looking for, and sure enough, these literate, Greek speaking authors (who are not the disciples since they almost certainly spoke Aramaic but certainly no Greek, and were probably illiterate) wrote anonymously the four gospels that became the New Testament. The purpose of those gospels was conversion, and so they are full of links to the great themes of Judaism.

They didn't always get it right, of course. In one rather famous case, the Hebrew word for a young woman in Isaiah, where the prophet predicts that a "young woman shall conceive and bear a son" was mistranslated as "virgin" in the Greek version of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint. That mistranslation became the basis for the King James Version (that we all know that God wrote), in which countless Christians have believed ever since Isaiah said, in reference to Jesus of course, that "a virgin shall conceive and bear a son." But that's not what Isaiah said — and besides that, Jesus certainly wasn't the Messiah most Jews were looking for. That Messiah was to be a military hero who leads them into battle, not a Galilean sage that some people thought was crazy who is executed as a political revolutionary.

On Thursday evening I went down to Norman to hear New Testament scholar Bart Erhman give a lecture entitled, "Are the books of the New Testament forged." What he meant, of course, in his rather inflammatory way, is did the authors of much of the New Testament write as if they were someone else (which we call forgery today), and his conclusion, which is widely shared among scholars, is "yes."

This is of course very disturbing to many people, including the dozens of OU students who lined up to argue with Dr. Erhman, but the gospels are not history, they are arguments in favor of Jesus as the Messiah. If you are going to make that argument to a mostly Jewish audience, then you look for clues in the only scripture that existed at the time that foreshadow and thus confirm God's plan for salvation. But if you were named Joe Schwartz and you wrote one of the gospels, you wouldn't stand a chance that anyone would read it unless you said a disciple had written it. That's why the gospels are presented as "The gospel *according* to Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John." What author presents his word with the phrase "according to" attached to it? That would be like me saying that my last book, "Saving Jesus from the Church, was a "book according to Robin Meyers."

Dr. Erhman went on to lament the fact that most pastors learn all this in seminary, but then they don't share what they learned with their congregations. Why? Because they are afraid that people will no longer trust in the authority of scripture. For most Protestants, the real Pope was replaced by the Paper Pope (the Bible), and that's where we put all our eggs. If the Bible is fallible, as the Pope is fallible (and who can doubt at this moment that Popes are fallible?), then where do we get our marching orders from? What can we trust? What can we believe?

All my study of the New Testament, and my exposure to the work of the Jesus Seminar has convinced me that the passion narratives are just that — narratives created to frame the Jesus story in such a way that observant Jews would take it seriously. I do believe that Jesus made a final trip into Jerusalem, but not during Passover, rather in the fall, during a Jewish harvest festival known as the Festival of the Booths.

One reason for believing this has to do with the strange reference to the cursing of the fig tree, which has bothered countless Christians. Jesus curses a poor little fig tree for not bearing any fruit, which is a metaphor for Israel, and then the gospel writers add, “for it was not the season for figs.” Well, then why would Jesus curse a tree for not bearing fruit out of season? Granted, Jesus may be very frustrated with Israel’s failures (aren’t we all these days?), but why take it out on a poor little tree that hasn’t even put on leaves yet?

Passover is celebrated between mid-March and early April, and in that climate, tree hadn’t even put on leaves yet. That’s why it’s odd to hear Mark’s gospel refer to the crowd picking up “leafy branches,” and waving them above their heads, but when Matthew writes his gospel a decade or so later, copying from Mark, he drops the word “leafy” and they become only “branches.” Then along comes Luke, even later, and omits any reference to it altogether, and just speaks of people shedding their garments, which suggests a warmer season.

Finally, John’s gospel, written at least six decades, if not more, after the death of Jesus, solves the whole problem of foliage by saying that the crowd waved “branches of palm trees” — that is, the leaves of an *evergreen* tree. It was not until John’s gospel that palms come into the picture at all, which is what our kids waved today.

If Jesus entered Jerusalem in September, it would have been the season for figs, and the curse for a barren fig tree would have made sense, with no apologies necessary. And did you know that at the Festival of the Booths, worshippers processed through Jerusalem and in the temple waving in their right hands something called a *lulab*, which is a bunch of leafy branches made of willow, myrtle, and palm. As they waved them, they recited words from Psalm 118, shouting what in Hebrew is *hosianna* or *hosanna*. Sound familiar?

Now why do I tell you this? Is it so that you will not trust scripture? No, it is so that you will understand scripture for what it is — a testimonial of faith,

which makes sense only if we understand the context in which it was written. After the lecture, I spoke to Dr. Erhman, and I told him that there is a place where the ministers of an Oklahoma Church share all this information with their congregation. It's called Mayflower, and he said, "I've heard of Mayflower. How do you get away with that?"

I said we are committed to seeking out the truth and telling the truth the best we can determine it. We recognize the value of people being able to make up their own minds, and here is the evidence in scripture itself, we say, for the gradual transformation of Jesus from a Galilean sage to a supernatural Savior. It is more than obvious that the gospel writers placed the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem during Passover to show that he was the new Paschal lamb, that just as the blood of the original lamb spread over the doorposts of the houses of the Israelites had spared their sons from the angel of death (who then "passed over" their houses and killed only the first-born children of Egyptian mothers — what a horrible story), Jesus now sheds his blood to save, not just for a God who is an Assassin, but as the later church fathers would concoct, the whole world from its sin — by a God who requires the sacrifice of his only son for our sins.

As the blood of the Paschal lamb would save the Jewish people, so the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross, or symbolically on the doorpost between heaven and earth, would save us all. In the story of the so-called "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem, Jesus rides in on a donkey (which has of course been problematic for Republicans ever since), in order to fulfill an OT prophecy from Zechariah that the humble king of the Jews world come riding into town on a lowly donkey.

But what is much more telling, and often gets overlooked, are the quotes attributed to Jesus which probably survived in the oral tradition and come down to us as a tantalizing portrait of a brooding, frustrated, perhaps even self-destructive prophet who can neither stop saying what will get him killed, nor refrain from teaching right up to the last minute.

When ordered to cease and desist, he says, "I tell you, if these (my disciples) were silent, the stones would shout out." And then, in the most poignant line of all in the story, "As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!"

Indeed. And it would not matter whether he said this in September, or in March, would it? At the Festival of the Booths or at Passover? In the ancient middle east or in Washington D.C.? And as for what people were waving over their heads, leafy branches, bare sticks, or Palm fronds; it wouldn't change the message, would it? The message is the same: the gospel has been spoken, the word is out, the deed is done, and you can't put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

I have given you the answer to the problem of human existence, and you still don't get it. Sound familiar? This week, in the shadow of the most ferocious efforts anyone has ever seen to try to stop something from happening, we passed the most sweeping piece of social legislation in 50 years, and took the first step toward achieving what every other developed nation on earth except South Africa has already accomplished — making access to health care possible for everyone. And look what the response has been?

Not by some lunatic fringe, but by the leaders of a major American party and their minions. The most violent, irresponsible, dangerous rhetoric I have ever heard coming from official sources inside the body politic. Senators and Congressmen who voted their conscience now placed inside cross-hairs, a former Vice-presidential candidate urging everyone in her state to come to Washington "locked and loaded." And party-operatives urging that bricks be thrown through the office windows of the enemy. And so it happened. Not in some third world country, but right here.

On April 19<sup>th</sup>, the date of the Oklahoma City bombing, Waco, and Ruby Ridge, which has become like Christmas for the anti-government, white supremacist crowd, a march on Washington has been called by those who have concealed carry permits, to see how close to the capitol an armed citizenry can get. Somebody is going to get shot, and then we'll hear mock indignation and a refusal to believe that this could happen in a Christian nation.

That's because we are *not* a Christian nation. We are profoundly Roman, and we still don't know the things that make for peace. As for our flesh and blood ally in the middle east, the national state of Israel that we created and now arm to the teeth, its intransigence and duplicity, its flaunting of the building of illegal settlements on occupied land is the major cause of terrorism in the world, and leads directly to the death of American soldiers. So what I want to know is, when do we cut off the aid?

We still do not know the things that make for peace. If we did we would send more Greg Mortensons to Afghanistan to build more schools, instead of sending more soldiers. If we wanted peace, we would work for justice. If we wanted others to simply live, then we would live more simply. If we knew the things that make for peace we would not assassinate all our peace makers. If we really wanted peace then we would get out of the war business, which is big business, and insist that nobody can graduate from high school who doesn't know who Archbishop Oscar Romero is, despite the efforts of the Texas School board to give us the textbook version of the Orwellian nightmare of 1984.

This is exactly why we need to save Jesus from the church. He is not the Paschal Lamb, saving us from our sin. He the one who weeps over Jerusalem because we are still blind to our own addictions, and not yet ready to trust God to heal us, and then through this to heal the world. That is the true message of holy week, and for that we can all be passionate.

The first temple to be cleansed should be the temple of the church: for its obsession with personal salvation over social justice, for its narrow vision of patriotism, for its defense of the indefensible over the years, whether that is the abuse of children in its care, the slaves that it did not free, the women it locked out, the gays and lesbians it persecuted, and the mineral resources it assumed God had provided for only white people to possess and exploit.

If you are given to weeping this week, don't weep over poor sinners not yet saved. Weep for all of us who do not yet know the things that make for peace. And if you are tempted by despair, do not forget that against the forces of money, power, lies, and the most reprehensible fear-mongering we have seen for a long, long time, we said no to special interests, and yes to people who deserve to see a doctor when they are sick. For this I am thankful and hopeful, and remain a hopeless patriot.

If the day comes when we are all silenced, then I am convinced by my faith in God that the stones will shout out. Not because they were thrown through a window, but because we spoke the truth to power.

Amen.