

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

*April 10, 2022*

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## Actions Speak

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

We don't know that it happened every year, but if he followed the usual Roman traditions we can assume that at some point during his time as governor Pontius Pilate rode into Jerusalem in a victory parade, likely more than just once. These would have been ostentatious occasions. Such a parade was intended to be a statement of Rome's power and might. Pilate would likely have been seated atop a warhorse, in beautiful clothing or armor, and accompanied by a small army of soldiers. He may have been joined by the puppet kings of Israel, but perhaps not if he wanted them to know their place too. Crowds would have likely gathered to see the unusual sight on their own, but if not soldiers would have ensured that the people of Jerusalem were in attendance. The whole parade was intended to send a message to the rebellious Israelites: do NOT mess with Rome. Some in the crowds may have cheered, but I imagine most would have rather jeered (if they dared).

And if Pilate had chosen to conduct such a parade, what better time than at Passover? Jerusalem would have been chock full of pilgrims from all over Palestine and beyond; what a great big audience! Plus, there's the bonus of the history of Passover. It was, essentially, the celebration of when God rescued Israel from the mighty Egyptian Empire. What a perfect moment for Pilate to arrive and impress upon Israel that Rome is **not** Egypt, and as a matter of fact, Rome ruled Egypt by this point in history. So go ahead and celebrate escaping the Egyptian Empire, but just in case you're thinking of trying to escape the Roman Empire, here is a reminder of what you would be up against.

The huge spectacle of such a parade is all about sending a message. Jesus, in his entry into Jerusalem, was also sending a message. He was sending a message to the people of Israel, to the people of Rome, to all people. True kingship and power are not exercised in the way that humans love to exercise

them. Military might and power amount to a hill of beans in the face of Christ's message. The message, the Gospel, was one of pure Truth.

And the truth is this, Jesus. Jesus who took on human flesh and limitation to show us what a sham our world is. Jesus who died on the cross, not to satisfy God's desire to punish humanity; but rather to open our eyes to the delusions we live under. Like the delusion that power is useless unless exercised over others. The delusion that there are arbiters of access to God's love and grace. Or, perhaps the greatest delusion, that we are in control.

The message of this Truth is embedded everywhere in Christ's entry into Jerusalem: he enters on a colt instead of a warhorse, he sits on a dirty, ragged cloak instead of an expensive saddle, he's wearing everyday clothes instead of finery, and he's accompanied by ragtag crowds full of unimportant pilgrims instead of soldiers and the wealthy. This message will continue as we make our way through Christ's Passion. His throne will be a cross. His crown, a wreath of thorns. And the scarlet he will wear will be the red of his spilled blood instead of a scarlet, ermine robe.

What a disappointment this message must have been to the people gathered there. Sure, they start off on board with what Christ is saying; but it doesn't last. And out of their disappointment their cries of "Hosanna" will turn into cries of "Crucify him!" in just a matter of days. We don't like our delusions being unmasked! We cannot stand that God will not conform to our expectations!

I shared with you a few weeks ago my frustration with substitutionary atonement theory. As a quick reminder, that's the idea that Jesus came to earth in order to take humanity's place in the face of God's wrath. Or divine "child abuse" if you recall my complaint about that atonement theory. I believe this message of Truth is the real reason Christ took on human flesh and form. It didn't have anything to do with God's wrath or punishing humanity or any of that stuff. When you really examine those reasons and theories, they are exactly in line with the human delusion that Christ is rejecting, aren't they?

All of those atonement theories have to do with human preoccupations and not the self-identified preoccupations of Jesus Christ. God's wrath, divine punishment, retribution, all of that stuff is exactly what **humanity** would do with God's power. Who wouldn't love to divinely smite their enemies? I'd wager those Israelites in Jerusalem would be quite happy to smite down

Pilate and the Roman Emperor and all the rest. Power is meant to be exercised over others after all!

Except, that's not the Way of Christ. The Way of Christ lies in giving up power and control. The Way of Christ is oriented towards humility, not power; towards meekness, not pride; and towards trust in God, not trust in might or wealth. The Way of Christ holds up a mirror to humanity so we can see ourselves more clearly. A mirror that lets us part the veil of our shared delusions and see the extreme damage we do to one another (and ourselves!!) because of them.

There are likely many reasons for the Incarnation and Passion of Christ. But I think there is no more important a reason for humanity than this one. We need to be confronted with the Truth: we are **not** in control, **none** of the things we pursue on our own can fulfill us, and **all people** are made in God's image. The Truth forces us to see how broken we are. How broken we have made the world. The Truth confronts us with our complicity in the damage done to ourselves, to others and to creation. The Truth is enough to make us despair!

But the Truth doesn't end there. While it pierces our delusions and confronts us with our brokenness; it also shows us a different way, the Way of Christ. A Way that leads to God's realm, a place of abundant love and grace, mercy and forgiveness. A Way that teaches us to accept others and love them as they are, knowing that it is only when encircled by safe and loving arms that change is even possible. A Way that leads us to connection with God, and through that connection, connection with all of creation.

The Truth holds up a mirror to show us our brokenness, but it also shows us that we are made in God's image. The Truth shows us that we are connected to, even grounded in, the sacred, the holy, the divine. The Truth shows us that we are **not** whole or well; but it also shows us exactly what we need to be whole and well...connection. Connection to God, and through that connection, connection one another and to all of creation. The Truth shows us God's love for us and for the cosmos.

Amen.