

Homily Part III: Easter Hallelujah

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Many years after the first Passover story was told, another group of Jews faced persecution—this time at the hands of the Roman Empire, and its proxy, Pontius Pilate.

Jesus, the people's rabbi, had been stirring up trouble. He challenged those in power, and empowered regular people, telling all manner of outcasts that they were "blessed--" the poor, the meek, the merciful, the ones who mourn...

He got more dangerous,

Blessed are the ones who stand for peace ... as the empire enforced its power through violence.

Blessed are those who are persecuted, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Hunger and thirst. Basic human needs. When you experience them, they become your singular focus.

Blessed are the activists, Jesus was saying. The ones who keep showing up, like Black Lives Matter protesters, because what is at stake is of ultimate worth.

Pontius Pilate must have been sick of those who hungered and thirsted for righteousness.

Worse, it was Passover: a time of inspiration for the Jewish people. Pilate needed to make sure they didn't get any ideas.

So he arrived in Jerusalem in an imperial procession, a display of his power.

How annoyed he must have been to learn that on the same day, Jesus also processed, his followers strewing the road with palm leaves and shouting, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

The meaning of it is rather lost on modern ears, but the spectators—and Pilate—knew what this was a reference to: the words of the prophet Zechariah, who cast a vision of a true king arriving humbly on the "foal of a donkey," as Jesus was.

On one side of town, Pilate, representing the Empire's violence. On the other side, Jesus, representing a prophetic grassroots movement. Not only that, he was called "son of God," the designation for an Emperor. Jesus was stealing the Emperor's authority by stealing his title.

This mocking challenge was the last straw.

We know the sentence Jesus received, crucifixion: the punishment for insurrection against the government.

What a dark day for his disciples. He wasn't just a revolutionary, but a holy man. Someone whom others experienced as radiant with spirit, some kind of inner light. Who saw them, blessed them, loved them.

Was hope gone? Is hope gone when an oppressive power prevails?

We in this country are afraid of oppressive power here, now. Our airwaves are filled with racist and sexist rhetoric, cheered on by an alarming number of Americans. Discriminatory laws are passed—the latest in North Carolina just this week. Voting rights are suppressed.

The timing is unmistakable: on the heels of the first black president, with a woman running to succeed him, and whites losing their majority status in the population—already fewer than half of children under 5 identify as white.¹ Same sex marriage is the new law of the land. Transgendered people are, overall, gaining respect.

It's a backlash.

In *The Bone People*, novelist Keri Hulme writes, "There is a time, when passing through a light, that you walk in your own shadow."²

From this pulpit, I have spoken of the evidence within the gospels themselves that they are meant to be taken seriously, but not literally. They are well crafted literary compositions, with techniques like bracketing one story within two halves of another, repeating certain phrases, and drawing forward phrases from past scriptures to evoke new meaning.

¹ <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/07/06/its-official-the-us-is-becoming-a-minority-majority-nation>

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So it is with the resurrection. The Jesus who reappears is not the exact Jesus who was executed. His disciples, who knew him better than anyone, don't recognize him. He appears in a closed room, as though he walked through the wall. He was buried with 100 pounds of spices, but gives off no scent. Yet the story says he is real enough to touch.

The "hallelujah" of Easter, of the gospel story, is praise for love that overcomes death, and praise for the hunger and thirst for righteousness that overcome violence. It is praise that the arc of the universe bends toward justice.

When Handel wrote *The Messiah* 274 years ago, it was considered an unorthodox piece, but achieved instant acclaim. An article in the *Smithsonian* points out an interesting thing about Handel: unlike Bach, who exalted God, Handel is more concerned with the human response to the divine.³ The hallelujah chorus washes over us with its power.

The song repeats the gospels' subversive claims: that the one who loves others and who works for justice, is a messiah, and God, not the Emperor, is the people's King. Whatever your theology, the phrase "king of kings, lord of lords" puts earthly rulers—and any dubious ambitions—in their place. It suggests their power will be overcome by something even more powerful—known by many names—from which Jesus, and Martin Luther King Jr, and the world's other prophets have drawn their strength.

And now we are going to experience an unorthodox version of this once unorthodox piece. The same traditional, yet subversive, words, the same joy, re-imagined for a gospel choir.

³ Read more: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-glorious-history-of-handels-messiah-148168540/#h1UfVpSu6Be3TKfR.99>