What does a king look like? It matters how you say the words. What does a *king* look like? What does a king *look* like? Today we are going to be talking about, what does a king *look* like? For the last several weeks as we have been fully immersed in this election cycle and as we at Hope UCC have been engaging in sacred conversations on race, I have been amazed, I have been shocked, and I have felt so defeated. Why? Because we still don’t know the answer to that question. It doesn’t feel like much has changed. We are still swimming in a cultural system that is so deeply ingrained in us, in ALL of us, that we can’t trust our own impressions, our own interpretations of what is right. We can’t even answer the question- “what does a king look like?”

The same was true on the first Palm Sunday, the one that Jesus lived and walked. People didn’t know what a messiah was supposed to look like. All previous experience told them that a Messiah, a king, was supposed to be physically strong, full of military might, a true expression of masculine power. At that time, there was no difference culturally between that kind of human display and what they believed God was. The Romans believed Caesar was a god. And even in the Bible, in the Hebrew scriptures, God is often portrayed as a military leader smiting Israel’s enemies.

And so there they were on the day of Passover, the day of salvation and deliverance and the people were ready. They were honoring and remembering the day that a strong God overpowered a strong Pharoah. At least how that’s how they interpreted it. They couldn’t imagine power any other way. And into that scene, two men entered Jerusalem.
Pontius Pilate, the governor, always came to the city on Passover. When people are celebrating a liberation, as their current oppressor, you want to make sure that things don’t get out of hand. So, he came in as a symbol of military strength. He probably had tons of chariots and soldiers with spears drawn. He also probably had opulent displays of wealth, beautiful armor, ladies throwing flower petals. Because wealth and power go together right? That’s what power looks like. That’s what order and authority feel like. Yeah the people were probably a little afraid, but that’s what we are supposed to feel right? A little in awe, a little jealous, and a little afraid.

Meanwhile Jesus was entering the city. And remember what the people were expecting: a military and political liberation. And Luke’s telling of this is a little different. There were no palms. There were no hosannas. Not as triumphant as Matthew. Just coats to protect the hoofs of the animal. It was not grand. It was not dominating. It wasn’t opulent. And I am guessing the people weren’t sure what to make of it. Jesus completely turned power on its head. He wasn’t the kind of king they were expecting. Jesus did it, but even today we still don’t know what to make of it. We don’t know how to reverse power dynamics. We can’t just change our values. I mean we know what’s going to happen Jesus, power will eventually take over right? Pontius Pilate is going to say, “see this is why I came to town,” let’s take care of this and kill this guy.” We know an angry mob will get worked up in violence and blood lust. They eventually will shout, “crucify him.”

And times have not changed all that much. Today in the media, I have watched as angry mobs have shouted hateful things as they clamber to follow the show of violence and wealth. I have watched as we tear down leaders and candidates who are not white men, most notably our current president. I have cried as the sinfulness in our humanity and our culture is so obvious. All of us, absolutely all of us, still have deep down this feeling that a king should be strong, a king should be ready to kill, a king should be powerful, a king should be white, and a king should be male. We want to say “Hosanna,” but the words “crucify him,” are too close to our lips.
Recently, I was talking to a friend about our sacred conversations on race. Like you might be, I have also been having lots of conversations in my personal life about racism and other forms of structural inequality. One thing I like about this particular friend is his integrity. He doesn't get to whipped up emotionally on stuff and is willing to look at things. And he was asking me about this structural stuff. And I gave an example of resume studies since I thought he would be able to relate to that in his field. I said there have been numerous resume studies about both race and gender. People reading resumes are more likely to choose the candidate who sounds white or who sounds male based upon their name or other identifying demographic markers. The same resume with a female name or a name more likely to belong to a person of color, less likely to be selected as qualified. Why? Because that's not what a qualified person LOOKS like. And my friend said, but what if the reader is a woman or a person of color? At first, he was thinking that the only reason white supremacy and patriarchy exist is because the people in power continued to pick people who look like them. I had to say, it’s more than that. And I said, regardless of the readers’ race or gender, they all picked the white and male candidates as superior. Because we have ALL internalized that message. We have all internalized that’s what a king looks like. It’s the cultural water that we are swimming in. And so those of us who do not fit that definition are constantly dealing with our own self-doubts and internal messages that we do not have what it takes. We are constantly sorting through the messages in our own minds asking God to make clear the truth of our value and the lie of our inferiority. And to all of you do fit that historic description of power and confidence, I hope you are seeking ways to bring down this system and lift up other visions of what power looks like, other ways to show what the king looks like.

This is our struggle and it isn't easy. So our problems today go back to the Bible and the Bible comes forward into today. Back to our story of two kings entering Jerusalem. We have Pilate coming in and we have Jesus. As Jesus entered, some people did recognize him and shouted “blessed is he who comes in the name of the
Lord.” But then the Pharisees tried to stop him. They protected the status quo and the power. They said “tell your disciples to stop.” These Pharisees are the foreshadowing. They are showing us that people don’t want a different-looking king. The Pharisees represent our sinfulness and our misconceptions of power. They represent white supremacist heteronormative patriarchy. They show us that part of ourselves that calls for hate and war. They represent death itself and the very stone of the tomb. They try to stop the message. They look at Jesus and say, “this is not what a king looks like. This is not what God looks like. Tell these disciples to stop this.” And what does Jesus say? He basically says “just try to stop them.” He says “even the stones will cry out.” No matter how many people you silence, no matter how many times you march in the troops of the empire, someone will always be left to whisper the truth. The stones will be there to call out.

Even if you get the women to sit quietly, even if you get the people of color to act violently, even if you “win” by military force, even if you put a savior on a cross, even if you get all your self-fulfilling prophecies to come true, the stones will still remain. There will be a kernel of truth left to guide us. The stones will pave a path all the way to the tomb we built, the tomb that will not contain the true king. Power will be changed. Our hearts will be changed. They must be. As the wonderful preacher Fred Craddock puts it, “just as stars can guide, lions and lambs can rest together, and in a few days, the earth can quake and the sun can go out at the worst moment of all.”

This is the essence of our faith. That we are sinful sometimes beyond our ability to know it or beyond our ability to stop it. That we long to say both “Hosanna, deliver us,” and “crucify him,” at the SAME TIME. How do we know which one to say? How do we know which king to follow? How do we know which is right? Often times, we don’t. If we knew, this life would be a heck of a lot easier, but we don’t always know. But the stones do. Jesus does. May we follow him today. May we follow him this week. May we understand the darkness inside of us. May we shout Hosanna as an invitation to the one who can turn everything around. May we shout Hosanna as
invitation to show us not what a king looks like, but rather as an invitation to show us we don't need that kind of king. May we shout Hosanna as an invitation to show us what love looks like. Hosanna for truth. Hosanna for justice. Hosanna for love. Amen.

Reference:


Links on Resume Research:
