

The World Turned Upside Down

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There is an Old Methodist hymn that begins with a pleading question.

“Ah Holy Jesus, how hast thou offended?”

I understand the question.

It can be really hard to figure out why so many people wanted Jesus dead. Why the powers in the world wanted to silence his message.

After all, how do we remember Jesus.

We remember him as gentle. Kind. Sitting with children. Teaching love. Healing the sick. Stopping beside the broken-hearted.

We usually remember Jesus as gentle and mild.

And on Palm Sunday, we remember the day that Jesus first entered Jerusalem and was greeted as a beloved hero.

With that image of Christ at the front of our mind, it is natural to ask, who could have had a problem with him? And so much of a problem that they would respond with such terrifying violence?

Who has he offended?

Well in today's story, he offends two groups, quite directly.

The first is the Roman Empire. The powerful foreign governors and rulers who controlled Jerusalem and the surrounding area during Jesus' life.

It's easy for us to miss, but in Jesus time there was really only one person who got to parade into the city. And that was the authorities of Rome. The Emperor. Or his representative governor.

In fact, we are nearly certain, from historical records outside the Bible, that the same day of Jesus Palm Sunday procession, there was a parade on the other side of the city where Pontius Pilate, the local Roman governor, was riding into town to great fanfare.

In fact, there was a strong expectation that when the governor rode into town, people would come out to cheer him on.

So the fact that all these people went to Jesus' parade instead, was a snub to the political powers of the day.

And then Jesus gets to the Temple.

Entering the Temple he sees a courtyard outside this most holy place filled with merchants. There are people who are exchanging Roman coins for a currency used in the temple and selling the animals needed for ceremonies in the temple. They are extracting exorbitant fees for these things, which are essential for people just trying to practice their religion.

You could just imagine if in the driveway out in front of the church there were people who were exchanging your money into a special currency that you needed to make your offering at church and they were charging a 20% transaction fee.

Of it communion bread had to be bought by each of you on communion Sunday, at a steeply inflated price.

That is what Jesus encountered in the temple courtyard.

And he got angry. And he flipped the tables over and chased all the merchants out.

Now that was big business, and there was a lot of money at stake.

So let's return to that question from before.

“Jesus, how hast thou offended?”

Well, he disrespected the political rulers of his world. And he disrupted a very lucrative business.

That's how he offended.

That is because behind Jesus kindness, and healing, and teaching, and hope, was also intense commitment.

Jesus was unwilling to let the world remain the same.

He was not content only to heal and teach. He wanted to disrupt the systems that were lying to people. He wanted to get rid of the kings who didn't care about their people. He wanted to change the laws that were hurting people.

He did not want the world to stay the same.

Jesus' life, and his movement, was all about taking poor people from the countryside, who never believed they could belong in the halls of

power, and insisting that the world take account of them. Of their needs. Their dreams. Their hopes.

And he did it against all odds. In fact, up against the most powerful empire the world had ever known.

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There is no tougher ticket to find right now than tickets to the musical Hamilton by Lin-Manuel Miranda. This show tells the story of the American Revolution through hip-hop.

The title character, Miranda says, is a man whose life embodies hip-hop. Hamilton arrived in United States a penniless immigrant, after escaping dire conditions in Nevis in the Caribbean. He rose to become an influential figure in the revolution largely on the basis of his skills in writing and rhetoric.

Hamilton, along with a group of young revolutionaries, went up against the most powerful empire of their day to secure independence for this country.

Many of them were in their twenties. In 1776 James Monroe and Lafayette were 18, Aaron Burr was 20, Nathan Hale was 21, Benjamin Talmadge and Robert Townsend were 22 and Betsy Ross was 24. George Washington was the elder of the movement at 44.

Because these people are have are remembered as they appear on our money, stately worn features and grey hair, it is easy to forget that when it all started, they were a group of young people, an ocean away from the halls of power, going up against the most well organized and powerful empire in the world.

The musical Hamilton captures this forgotten dynamic well.

The climactic moment of the show is the Battle of Yorktown. A fierce siege that ended with a British surrender.

In Hamilton, Hamilton sings about the victory this way:

We negotiate the terms of surrender

I see George Washington smile

We escort their men out of Yorktown

They stagger home single file

Tens of thousands of people flood the streets

There are screams and church bells ringing

And as our fallen foes retreat

I can hear the song they're singing...

At which point the retreating soldiers together sing:

The world turned upside down.

The world turned upside down.

If you have see the show staged, you will see that this moment that the set us being changed, from the battlefield, to an indoor room.

And as the soldiers sing, they are carrying furniture out on onto the stage, chairs, benches, and a table.

All held over their heads.

Upside-down.

The world turned upside down. The most powerful were staggering away in defeat. The lowly were celebrating in the street.

It was a moment when suddenly the old rules that seemed to keep everything in place unraveled. The lowly really had a chance. The powerful really could be sent away.

That is what Jesus was showing us on Palm Sunday.

Parading into a city flaunting rules that demanded deference to Rome.

Turning tables upside down in the temple, and sending the money changers running.

Jesus was showing us that his movement of healing, of hope, of teaching. It was not just about changing lives one at a time. And it wasn't all gentle.

It was about turning the world upside down. Sending the powerful away empty, and parading peasants right into the halls of power.

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This is important.

The Palm Sunday procession shows us that God cannot be domesticated into niceness, and God is not indifferent to the ways power is used in our world.

Christ came to turn the world upside down.

Which involved lifting up the lowly.

And pulling the powerful down from their thrones.

Which is why, on this Sunday, before Holy Week, our scripture reading leaves us with the first faith whispers out of the halls of power.

“They started looking for an excuse to kill him; because they were afraid of him.”

