

## **The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - April 5, 2020 - What Is Needed Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 and Matthew 21:1-11**

On March 12, after large gatherings were prohibited in our state, Playhouse Square in Cleveland officially closed to the public. My wife and I have season tickets and, one night earlier, witnessed the final performance of Jesus Christ Superstar, which is now in its fiftieth year of production. In the play, Jesus enters Jerusalem amid shouts of “Hosanna” as the crowd yells, “Hey JC, JC, won’t you fight for me?”

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Those gathered expected Jesus to come as a warrior king, riding on a stallion, “poised to annihilate the armies of their Roman overlords.” Such a leader would fight for the underdogs, not just with words, but “by subduing force with (even) greater force.” *Connections*, 114. For what qualified as strong leadership in those days is much the same as it is today. In each era, we find the underlying expectation that those at the top will reign with “strength, power, wealth, and influence.”<sup>2</sup>

But if this is the expectation, that in order to be thought of as bold and courageous, one must come out swinging, then what are we to make of Jesus? Yes. If those at the top learned to get there by scraping and clawing, fighting sowing

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Rice, “Jesus Christ Superstar Soundtrack - Hosanna Lyrics,” <http://www.songlyrics.com/jesus-christ-superstar-soundtrack/hosanna-lyrics/>.

<sup>2</sup> Diane G. Chen, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 2, Lent through Pentecost*, ed. Joel B. Green (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 114.

division, then what does that mean for those of us who have chosen to follow the Prince of Peace?

Today, in communities around the world, people are afraid. The same virus that has closed schools, businesses, and theaters has also taken lives. Here in Akron, a friend of mine has now lost two of his grandparents to COVID-19. Tragically, both of them died alone. He and other survivors are now mourning not only the loss of loved ones, but the postponement of church memorials that would have provided glimpses of comfort during these incredibly difficult times.

Friends, the current pandemic is not some abstract problem in a far off land. It is here in our community. It is dwelling among us. And having taken up residence here, it is disrupting our routines, interfering with our relationships, squelching our freedoms, and instilling anxiety at levels that many of us have never experienced. Yes. As much as we long for normalcy, we have now entered survival mode. And we are each, in our own ways, seeking to secure our existence.

As I reflect on the dramatic changes now upon us, I am reminded of the significance of that first Sunday in Lent. There, in the desert wilderness, we find Jesus participating in a mission to trust and obey the will of his Father. He has just completed a lengthy fast as Satan arrives and tempts him to seek the paths of

domination and control. Jesus is reeling from hunger, and Satan uses this opportunity to pounce. He goads him to “turn these stones into loaves of bread,” in a scene which is now playing out in grocery stores nationwide. Now, we hear a similar voice telling us that we do not have enough. So we best grab what we can and hoard all that we can buy for we are living in uncertain times.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus, our guide, refused to give into this temptation. Quoting scripture, he said, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Then, in quick succession, he was greeted with two, additional temptations. In each, Jesus is called upon to use his authority to demonstrate the power of God. It’s as if the tempter is saying, “Show your people, by the working of some miracle, that everything in sight is really under your control.” But well aware of the trap, Jesus maintains that the fears and anxieties of this world will not have the final say.

I recognize that our stress levels are high and that, in the midst of this global crisis, we are now longing for every semblance of control. Understandably, many of us are stockpiling paper products and washing our hands at a rate that we have never experienced. Yet, there is another side to this, as well, as people scramble to calm their fears and secure their own destiny. Just take, for example, the incredible surge

in firearm sales, up 85 percent this March from just one year prior.<sup>3</sup> The message here is very clear. People are afraid.

These current trends raise some important questions for us as followers of Christ. Like how is God calling us in the midst of this pandemic? How are we to differentiate between the will of God and the ways of this world? And, finally, are we addressing our fears constructively and in the ways in which God intends? For Jesus, the one who was tempted to control his own destiny in the wilderness, the one who was criticized for ministering to outcasts, and the one who rode foolishly through the streets of the holy city is speaking to us still. And he is reminding us that the remedy to our anxiety is not violence or the threat of force, but is, instead, gratitude and the practice of love. For ours is a divine calling to nurture and sustain life.

Like many people who now are sheltering in place, some of my biggest adventures these days involve walks in my own neighborhood. At that speed, you are able to pause and take notice of the things that are happening all around you. One of my neighbors has displayed hearts in her living room windows. Another has done the same with rainbows. The owners of one home have staked up four giant letters

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fox26houston.com/news/gun-sales-surge-85-percent>

in their front yard as an ever-present reminder to “hope,” while another encourages us that “the sun will rise again tomorrow.”

Other symbols are familiar. Each year, one of my neighbors adds a beautiful, stained glass cross to a bed of flowers in her front yard. While I have long admired the beauty and faithfulness of this sentiment, it seems even more powerful this year as Paul’s words to the Corinthians ring in my ears. “The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.” And so, the Savior rides on in folly, hoping against hope and providing all that is needed. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.