Palm Sunday, March 19, 1989
THE CROSS OF JESUS: THE ANSWER TO VIOLENCE (No. 6 in a Series)
Luke 19:28-41

The Hebrews had been under the control of the Roman Empire for too long. No country and its citizens want to be occupied by a foreign power. Continually, there had been talk of revolution. All that was needed was the right leader — someone who could inspire the people so that a violent overthrow of the occupying power could take place.

That first Palm Sunday was a hope-filled occasion because many in the crowd who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover believed that Jesus was destined to be that kind of leader. Rumors had circulated about the miracles Jesus had performed. There was even a story going around that He had raised a man named Lazarus from the dead.

Although many in the crowd that day were carrying palms, symbols of peace, it was also true that the Roman authorities had forbidden the carrying of any kind of weapons. To be sure, people were praising God, but they were also hailing what many believed to be the King of Israel, the new King David. Some in the crowd no doubt recalled the prophecy of Zechariah: "Behold, your king is coming to you, humble and riding on a donkey." They remembered how previous kings — Saul, David, and Solomon — had put together powerful armies and had ruthlessly slaughtered their enemies. They wanted their nation restored to the glory it had in the past.

The crowd shouted, "Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel." Jesus acknowledged and accepted their welcome, even though He knew they were expecting a different kind of savior. So it was that when Jesus drew near the city, He wept over it, saying, "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace, but now they are hid from your eyes."

Then, as now, human beings worshiped violence and raw power. Yet Jesus knew long before Lord Acton said it: "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely." Jesus knew the tendency of violent power to become a theology — admitting no other gods before it.

Even Jesus' closest followers, the twelve disciples, found themselves trusting more in the victory of destruction than in the power of forgiving love.

Earlier, when Jesus had made up His mind to go to Jerusalem, He had sent some of His disciples ahead to Samaria to make preparations. They reported back to Him that the Samaritans did not want Jesus and His followers to come through their territory or stay overnight among them. So the disciples had proposed a simple solution to the problem. "Teacher, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?" In other words, if the Samaritans are a problem to us, if their inhospitality is an insult, destroy them, kill them. That will solve the problem. But Jesus would have none of it.

Later in the week, after Palm Sunday, the enemies of Jesus proposed the same solution. Is Jesus a problem? Is He guilty of blasphemy? Is He a threat to peace? Has He questioned some of our religious beliefs? Then crucify Him.

Sound familiar? A man named Salman Rushdie, in his novel The Satanic Verses, is accused of blasphemy against the religion of Islam. What's the solution? Kill him.

Lest we modern-day Christians become too self-righteous, it may help us to remember that in the early days of the colonial period of this country, a New England Calvinist of the Congregational tradition suggested that a militia be sent to Pennsylvania to capture William Penn and his Quaker followers so that they might be sold into slavery before their “heresy” could spread to the new world.

This is only one example of the long history of persecution, violence, recriminations, threats, and killing in which Christians have engaged — all in the name of defending the honor of God. Bigots who invoke God seem to get tenderer treatment than those whose intolerance is less lofty or theological in tone.

After the resurrection of Jesus, Christians were persecuted and killed in violent ways by those who regarded Christianity as heresy. For example, Stephen, who is known as the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death. You can read about it in the Book of Acts. Then, not much later, the Roman Empire tried to kill Christianity by killing Christians. Still later, we Christians had not yet learned that violence is not the answer, and the church tortured people who were within the church but who were considered to be heretics and burned many of them at the stake. Again, it was done in the name of God.

Parenthetically, what is especially troubling, when one reflects on what has so often been Christianity’s sorry history in regard to religious freedom, is the nagging suspicion that the commitment we American Christians have to free thought and free speech is as much a function of the restraints placed on us by an increasingly secular society — which will not tolerate any theocratic meddling — as it is a function of our high-minded liberality and tolerance.

Frankly, I believe we Christians should be thankful for those who call into question what we believe. They can help keep us honest. Any form of monotheism can be a terribly dangerous faith if it’s not kept humble. Think of what the following formula can lead to: There is one God and sovereign of the universe, and we are the true believers of the one God of the universe; who but we true believers can defend God’s honor and advance God’s will? How wonderful it is to have people around who resist the true believer’s reach for power. Maybe that’s why Jesus asked us to pray for our enemies and to bless those who persecute us.

But we shouldn’t need unbelievers to keep us honest. The cross of Jesus should be sufficient. But we are rarely able to learn the lesson of His cross except as we are forced to bear our own. In any case, it is clear that Christianity was born in the blasphemy committed against the Son of God in His crucifixion. But God was not undone by such blasphemy; rather, God took up the blasphemy of sinful men and women into God’s redemptive purpose, and God still is doing that. God can never be undone by any blasphemy.

But back to our main theme — why is it that we who want to call ourselves Christians continue to believe so much in the power of destruction and death when the message of the cross is the opposite? There is still a lot of support for the idea, even among Christians, that the best way to get rid of what we see as the worst and as evil is shooting it down, putting it in a gas chamber or electric chair, or bombing it to hell. Hitler called his mass murder of the Jews, “The Final Solution.”

There is no permanent victory through violence. So first of all, the cross of Jesus tells us that there is never any permanent victory or final solution that comes to the users by the use of

violence and death, or even the threat of violence and death. Killing people never brings a final solution.

Jesus offered a different kind of salvation. Secondly, when Jesus entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, although He received the worship of the crowds, He did not try to stifle their enthusiasm, yet at the same time He refused to be the kind of savior they had in mind. The people who greeted Him hoped for a return to past days of glory. They wanted a human leader, a hero, a worldly ruler who would save them and make their nation great.

Jesus wanted His followers to understand that a new kind of world is possible, that with the coming of Jesus and with His death and resurrection, God is bringing a new kind of world into being, a world beyond violence, destruction, and killing; a world that transcends narrow nationalism. The good news of the cross, of the death and resurrection of Jesus, is that God is not yet finished with the world, that God's ways are not our ways, that God is bringing a new world into being.

Jesus boldly imagines the coming of a day when children will not die, cities will not be filled with lonely or homeless or hungry people, when people will no longer discriminate against each other on the basis of race, sex, nationality, or creed, and peace will be more than the delicate balance of nuclear power.

Isn't it true that too often we Christians assume that God is finished with the world? We assume that what you see is what you get. We are unable to transcend what is already present. Recently, I came across this metaphor: We approach the "room" of modern life and offer strategies for the rearrangement of the furniture. Jesus, on the other hand, opens the door to a whole new room, a whole new way of living where we do not return hate for hate, or violence for violence; where we forgive unconditionally; where we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us; where we no longer are captive to the power of violence and death.

God's love excludes no one. The cross of Jesus is the answer to violence because now we know that no one is excluded from God's love. Jesus even forgave those who nailed Him to the cross. God's grace is and always has been everywhere. So when Jesus spoke of enlarged borders and a greater destiny, He was not speaking of conquest and more territory; rather, He was talking of broader sympathies and broken barriers of race and class.

That's what Palm Sunday and the cross that follows it are all about — not Jesus coming as a worldly leader or conqueror, or hero into Jerusalem, or into our world. It is about God coming into this world as a servant and suffering with us; about God in Christ on the cross absorbing all the hate and violence that we can dish out and in so doing, empowering the weak, healing the hurt, and taking on the suffering of the world. That's good news for all of us. Amen.