

“What Would I Have Done?” by David Lloyd

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Palm/Passion Sunday

Join with me – (sing “Joy to the World.”) Go ahead; wave your palms in time to it.

Those words don’t mention God’s incarnation as a human baby. They express exactly what the crowd greeting Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem felt – the Messiah had finally come! What were they expecting? In Hebrew the term Messiah means “the anointed one.” Every king of Israel and of Judah had been anointed with oil at the onset of his reign. The Messiah too would become king, delivering Jews from oppression and into freedom and ushering in God’s kingdom, when the whole world worshipped the God of Israel and looked to the Jews for guidance, when evil and cruelty and hatred would be no more, when there would be no hunger or illness or disease or death, when ruined cities would be rebuilt and fields would be fertile, when Jewish

refugees would return, when nations repented and atoned for their actions against the Jews, when peace would reign and there would be no need to create weapons, when there would be no sorrow but joy would last forever, when the dead would be raised. Belief in the coming Messiah is a very old tradition in Judaism, recorded in various scrolls of the Hebrew Scriptures, especially in Isaiah. And of course, Jews still await the coming of the Messiah.

For the followers of Jesus, the week started with a day of joy, a day of celebration, the long wait was over, the Messianic Age was beginning. Six days later not only had the Messianic Age not begun but Jesus had been betrayed, arrested, publicly condemned as a blasphemer, tortured and crucified as a Roman seditionist, and buried in a tomb. By Saturday all his followers were scattered, with the ones who had been closest to him now in hiding, their hopes and dreams shattered.

What had gone wrong? The Pharisees, Sadducees, and Zealots each had different expectations of what the Messiah would be like. Jesus didn't meet any of these expectations; he could only be a false Messiah. So he should be killed for raising false hopes, for endangering the people.

The Pharisees were the spiritual descendants of those who helped the Jews keep their faith while they were captives in Babylon. The Temple, the center of Jewish religious life from the time of Solomon, had been destroyed so in Babylon they had created houses of assembly (in Greek, "synagogues") and houses for prayer and study of the Torah. After the Persians allowed the Jews to return to Judea, the Second Temple was built but because this happened with the permission of, or assistance or encouragement of, a pagan foreign power, many didn't believe

it was truly God's Temple. The devout had kept the faith alive in Babylon, so they believed that they were the ones with divine authority to decide what was and what wasn't true belief and practice. They competed with the Temple priesthood and with others about the proper interpretation of God's Word. The Pharisees expected the Messiah to be the authoritative Teacher of the Torah as foretold in The Book of Psalms. All would understand and would follow God's way into the golden age. And of course the Teacher would be a Pharisee.

Jesus had already had many debates and arguments with the Pharisees in Galilee and during his journeys to Jerusalem about whether the interpretations of the Torah for religious practices in everyday life were consistent or inconsistent with its deepest meaning. They both taught a vision of God's shalom that incorporated the letter and the essence of the Torah and the prophets, a time and place where everyone loved God with all their hearts and minds and souls and strength and loved their neighbors as they loved themselves. But Jesus thought that the Pharisees' interpretations created a burden that undermined the Torah and Jesus added that "neighbors" most definitely included those who were poor, those who were sick, and those who were living a lifestyle that most people, especially the Pharisees, would describe as sinful and unclean. To Jesus, "neighbors" even included Samaritans or Gentiles. Not only that, such neighbors could actually be the ones who saved the righteous, as the Good Samaritan saved the man beaten and left for dead on the road to Jericho, which made no sense to Pharisees. Even more outrageously, Jesus taught that God especially loved these unrighteous or less righteous ones who had repented, who had turned their lives around, more than God loved those who focused on living righteously but ungenerously.

The Pharisees respected Jesus, because he clearly had charisma, the sign of God's favor. That was evident because Jesus taught with authority and could perform signs and wonders. He had fed crowds, he had healed the sick, he had caused the blind to see, and he had even raised Lazarus from the dead. He was worthy of debate but to the Pharisees, Jesus' interpretations were wrong, dangerously wrong, potentially blasphemous. His way could lead the people into apostasy, bringing about God's vengeance again, maybe even exile again. Now he had entered Jerusalem as if he was the Teacher Messiah of the Book of Psalms. For the Pharisees, there was no way that Jesus could be the Teacher Messiah. He was a false Messiah and had to be publicly disgraced and silenced so that people would not be led into false doctrine. The punishment for blasphemy was stoning to death.

The Sadducees were the political and religious elite organized around the Temple priesthood. The priests had to ensure that the people could keep practicing the sacrifices, religious festivals, and rituals that had been commanded by God as written in the Torah. To do this, since the time that King Solomon built the first temple, and then again with the restoration of the second Temple after the Jews' return from the exile in Babylon, the Temple priesthood was tied to the ruler of the Jewish people. By the time of Jesus, the high priest Caiaphas was appointed by the Romans. Like all elites the Sadducees had a stake in ensuring political stability, which meant that the priests were involved in politics, lending political support to a potential claimant to the throne who would support the Temple, trying to change the behavior of any monarch whose corruption was notorious, pacifying the people to endure the latest degradation by the current foreign ruler, trying to stem rebellions that were sure to be unsuccessful. Around the time of Jesus' birth at least three false Messiahs had led military rebellions that

had been crushed either by the Herodian puppet regimes or by the Roman army, resulting in more suffering and oppression. Those tied to the priests by family or commercial interests wound up in administrative positions, including local political governance, international affairs, raising taxes for the government, judging local disputes, and equipping an army or peacekeeping force.

The Sadducees would have been happy for a Messiah as a monarch like King David or Solomon. The Temple would be central again, with no doctrinal competition coming from Pharisees. Their place in the religious and political would return to that under the glory years so many centuries before. But on Palm Sunday the Sadducees saw Jesus, riding on an ass, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah that the Messiah king would enter Jerusalem in exactly this way. And he did while thousands of pilgrims were coming into Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, the greatest of the religious festivals, the one celebrating their liberation under Moses from slavery in Egypt, a time when the Romans brought additional soldiers into Jerusalem in case there would be riots. Then the very next day this Jesus came into the Temple and caused a ruckus by knocking over the tables of those who sold animals and birds for the very sacrifices God had commanded in the Torah, and was heard to claim the God would destroy the Temple. He could only be a false Messiah. Jesus, like any other false Messiah, had to be silenced and disgraced before the Romans used him as an excuse to crush them again. If he spoke blasphemy they could stone him to death; if he spoke sedition they could let the Romans execute him as a rebel.

And then there were the Zealots. It's thought they formed during the time of the rebellion of Judas of Gamala, also known as Judas of Galilee. This occurred about the time Jesus

was born, when Quirinius had imposed a census for tax purposes – the reason Joseph and Mary journeyed to Bethlehem. The Romans crushed this rebellion by crucifying thousands in Galilee – Joseph and Mary would have remembered this well and may have told Jesus about it as he was growing up. The Zealots who survived hated the Sadducees for their accommodation to Roman rule; in general they agreed with the Pharisees' views but they sought to mobilize the Jews in Judea to rebel against the Romans rather than waiting for God to do it.

The Zealots expected the Messiah to be a military leader, as foretold by the prophets, who would lead some kind of army, possibly including a divine host of angels, into defeating whichever power was oppressing God's beloved people, in this case, Rome. The Zealots saw the crowds following Jesus ready to support him. When he caused the disturbance in the Temple the Zealots were awaiting a signal from him to begin the fight that this time would bring down Rome. But he gave no sign for an insurrection. He clearly was a false Messiah; if he died it was no loss to them.

Our Lenten liturgy says that we journey with Jesus toward his death and that Jesus journeys with us as we endeavor to die to our old habits and destructive ways. This is right and true, and yet it almost makes it sound as if Jesus died of illness or of old age. If the Gospels are correct, Jesus knew that his coming to Jerusalem would spark the Temple authorities into having him killed, but he thought he would be resurrected, which would somehow precipitate the Messianic Age. If Jesus was fully human some part of him may have been in fear and denial, fear that he wouldn't be resurrected and denial that he would have to die. Instead, maybe at death's door God would send angels to rescue him. Maybe at Gethsemane he faced his fear and overcame his denial.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees both feared Jesus, and acting out of fear, the Sadducees did what Jesus had predicted and set things in motion for the Romans to kill Jesus in an especially painful and gruesome way as a warning by Rome to anyone who felt the call to being a Messiah. While we may understand their fear, we condemn their actions. Christians' long history of anti-Semitism has always pointed the finger of blame at the Sadducees, or more broadly at all Jews, as "Christ killers." The Roman soldiers who actually tortured and crucified Jesus weren't blamed – they were just following orders.

In the award-winning movie *The Reader*, based on the novel by Bernhard Schlinkⁱ a postwar German court is prosecuting women who were SS guards at a woman's satellite work camp at Auschwitz. The evidence showed that each month 60 women came from Auschwitz to work and so 60 were sent back to Auschwitz where they were killed. The prosecuting judge asks Hannah Schmidt whether she had been aware that when she selected each group to return to Auschwitz she had sent them to their certain death. She replies, "There were new women coming every month. We had nowhere to put them, so we had to make room by sending some back." Although the prosecutor persists in trying to get her to admit her moral culpability, she either is unable to understand her culpability or cannot or will not admit it. The monstrously evil situation was clear to everyone in the courtroom, but in puzzlement about what was the moral thing to do she asks him for help. "If you were there, what would you have done?" There is a pause and a beat of uncomfortable silence in the entire courtroom, and then the prosecutor replies that she not to question the court.

If I had been there in Jerusalem, what would I have done? If we Seekers had been there in Jerusalem, what would we have done? (silence)

The silence is uncomfortable. Like the original Holy Week we begin each day, each week, each month, each year with the high hopes that God's shalom is finally coming. And then we tense up when conflict comes, our bodies go into flight or fight mode and we make expedient decisions – to distance ourselves from the conflict, or to betray, or to condemn, maybe even to hurt with words or with physical violence, or even to kill. Or more likely, since we are good people, we don't kill directly but that we too make decisions that all too often result in the killing of others.

This month we began commemorations of the beginning of the Civil War. We do not talk about the more than 200,000 deaths in battle or from battle wounds because at the end of the war the nation was still one and African-American slavery ended. We Seekers want peace but we support men and women who have volunteered to take up arms and if necessary to kill any others who threaten what we hold dear. We do not admit that we expect our military leaders to train our service members, young men and women, to identify appropriate human targets, condition them to sight their weapons on those human enemies, to pull the triggers or otherwise transmit lethal force against those human enemies, to continue to do this until the human enemies surrender or die, to immediately cease fire, and then to feel absolved from their actions. As Marine Colonel B.P. McCoy says about training Marines for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 in his book, *The Passion of Command: The Moral Imperative of Leadership*,

We told the Marines that they were absolved of the deaths

they would cause. When they killed legitimate targets within the rules of engagement, they would be praised. Their conscience should be clear and their honor clean as long as they acted within the rules of engagement and my intent and orders. We would not be killing as individuals, but as a cohesive unit. The burden of killing belongs to the commander. I was prepared to answer to my maker for the deaths that we inflicted.ⁱⁱ

We Seekers want a nonviolent end to tyranny but when nonviolent protesters in Libya were attacked by Ghaddafi's air force NATO decided that a no-fly zone shall be imposed. Our Air Force leaders know that to enforce a no-fly zone means that our pilots must rain death and destruction from the air upon military command and control targets and upon aircraft, killing people in those targets. We Seekers stayed silent. For the sake of the Libyan people, a few must die.

We Seekers deplored the involvement of American military and CIA personnel in torturing Iraqi and Al Qaeda prisoners, but at least some of us Seekers admitted we would support such torture if it would spare the lives of those nearest and dearest to us from being killed by a terrorist. Do we, like the Sadducees, believe that the end justifies the means? (silence)

It is right to sing joyously of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and next week to revel in Easter's grace of resurrection. But to get there we have to really experience Holy Week. We have to feel the growing tension in the conflict between Jesus and the Sadducees in our bones, to suffer with Jesus' agony and subsequent arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane on Maundy

Thursday, to feel afraid for our own lives, to experience the desolation of Good Friday. We must dare to ask ourselves, was I a follower who deserted him, or worse, who betrayed him? Was I someone who hoped for a Messiah but needed to kill this man for the peace of the nation? Was I a Roman soldier, just following orders? If I had been there what would I have done? To risk hearing the silence of the courtroom.

i. London: Tandem Books, 1995.

ii. Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Association, 2007, pg. 44.