

Celebration of Disruption

Zechariah 9: 9-13 Luke 19: 37-48

If you have a plan, then you know you should have a Plan B. A plan is helpful in figuring out how you're actually going to accomplish something. But it doesn't take much experience to realize that a typical plan doesn't often work out exactly as expected. If you're moving, the logistics and the timing can become a small nightmare as Kathy and the Pettys have discovered. As if the hassle of moving wasn't enough, throw in some changes of plans, some delays, and you find the disruptions are literally running your life.

This political season has been quite a sight. Just a few months ago, the expectation was that Republicans would anoint Jeb Bush and Democrats would anoint Hillary Clinton as their respective presidential candidates. They had pedigree names, war chests stuffed with cash, the resumes and recognition, and the support of their respective establishments. That they would be the nominees wasn't so much a plan as their destiny.

Then came the electorate. While all eyes watched the chosen ones strut before the pundits, no one thought of consulting with the people who actually do the voting. Now that that has happened, the whole political calculus is in utter chaos. Never mind disruption; we're in meltdown!

Disruptions like this are neither positive nor negative, they simply are – a fact of life. However, it does a number on expectations, predictability, and security.

In business, economists are eager to identify disrupters, organizations that turn assumptions on their head and capitalize on their new approach. T-Mobile, the cell phone carrier, had sought a merger with AT&T a few years ago. AT&T said it needed the boost from T-Mobile's 4G LTE to jumpstart its coverage with that new standard of cell service. Regulators said no. AT&T got up off its duff and did its own expansion quite handily. Meanwhile, T-Mobile – which was supposed to have been drive into irrelevancy by the merger failure – got new leadership, slashed rates, and came up with innovative new plans that disrupted the industry, giving it a leading role once again. It was a case of disruption being just what was needed to re-energize both organizations.

But disruptions can be negative, too. We've seen too many tragic instances on the world stage as terrorist organizations have sought to be destructively disruptive. Citizens in this nation have been willing to sacrifice the most iconic civil rights enshrined in our Constitution in order to satisfy new security concerns. In fact, the entire government security apparatus was totally overhauled, creating a ghastly huge bureaucracy whose actual effectiveness is still unknown.

We do know that the government is collecting so much information about its own citizens that it is 100% impossible that all of the information can be assessed, even with the most astute logarithms distilling the scads of information. Worse, this catch-all

strategy means genuine terrorist communications are lost and made irrelevant in the data maelstrom, together with my last blast email to you. Their disruption has succeeded fabulously, bringing the people of the most powerful nation on earth into quivering mass of paranoid hysteroids, armed to the teeth as if terrorists actually cared about them.

God's agenda frequently involves disruption, according to whatever the agenda requires.

In the reading from the prophet Zechariah, we hear the text that was cited in the gospels to explain what Jesus was doing riding donkey into Jerusalem. But before we get too far ahead of ourselves and into the era of Jesus, let's allow Zechariah's words to be understood without the Jesus-Christian references right now.

This passage in Zechariah comes long after the return from Babylon, presumably still during Persian rule. Our selection today was preceded by a vision of God's subduing those nation-states around Judah who had recovered more fully and enjoyed greater prosperity and security. In this vision, God has disrupted the political alignments and upended expectations, bringing to Judah the security, peace, and prosperity it has long sought.

Our selection describes the victorious king returning from battle. The reference to this king riding a donkey hearkens back to Genesis 49 when Jacob is blessing his sons just before his death. Jacob's blessing for his son Judah says:

Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you.

The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples is his.

Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine and his robe in the blood of grapes; his eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.

Clearly, Judah is blessed by his father Jacob to be a conquering warrior. The imagery and symbolism of "washing his garments in wine and his robes in the **blood** of grapes" is pretty unmistakable.

Zechariah's vision cites the blessing of Judah coming to reality. The donkey has nothing to do explicitly with humility, but everything to do with Jacob's blessing in Genesis 49. In Zechariah's vision, the prophet is saying that promised blessings of ancient times are to be fulfilled. It's about a human king, but not of works done by the human king. Rather the promises made before God are to come into being thanks to God's acts for his people in fulfillment of God's promise. The donkey image directs attention away from the king and instead toward God.

The achievement of peace, freedom, and restoration is made complete. The expected order and standing of the nations will be disrupted so that the promise of God to his people will be fulfilled.

As we turn to Luke's extended account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, we should be aware that everyone knows that this is a going to disrupt everyone and everything. It is already a tense time since the Passover season has brought pilgrims from throughout the Mediterranean region and beyond to swarm in the streets of Jerusalem. The Roman military is on high alert. It's in times like these when the wackos come out of the woodwork and start trouble. There will be little patience for those who are disruptive.

Pontius Pilate is likely already in the city, having traveled from the imperial capital in Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast. He would expect to be on-hand for official duties during the holiday period. We can imagine that he arrived in a caravan of military guards, servants, pack animals and carts, and the like. Surely it would have been a very impressive procession coming through the gates and through the streets of Jerusalem. Coming from Caesarea, we would have approached the city from the west passing through Emmaus.

Jesus comes from the opposite direction, through Bethany from the east. Jesus has no caravan; he has no need of a caravan. He represents the poor and powerless. A donkey is fine, but moreover the donkey hearkens once again to the blessing of Jacob on his son Judah as well as the prophecy in Zechariah. It's the fulfillment of God's promise ancient promise through Jacob, recast in Zechariah, that the true king comes to the holy city, to Zion, the city of God. Here comes divine disruption.

I liked the bulletin cover artwork because it shows narrow streets, packed with many busy people of all kinds. If you look in the back by the arch, you'll see a highly elevated, larger-than-life statue of some Roman figure. It stands in the background while down low in the foreground is the image of Jesus, highlighted by the lighting, not by his actions or size or prominence. Jesus has entered the city of God that is occupied by the empire. It is a direct confrontation.

The cheers of his disciples, *Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!* Some Pharisees are alarmed at such shouts. These are words of treason that could bring a swift, vicious, unrestrained response by the Roman guard. Jesus scoffs at these fears. God's actions would provoke such praises from the stones, if need be. They cannot be helped. The disciples understand that Jesus is acting to fulfill God's promise.

Yet he stops and weeps over the city. The city's past – the devastation at the hands of the Babylonians – will come again to this generation. It will refuse the peace of God which Jesus incarnates, which Jesus teaches. Unable or unwilling to seek God's coming, or to believe that God would come and fulfill God's promise with his people, then the ultimate destiny of the city is clear.

Luke's gospel has Jesus' scene at the Temple taking place in just two verses. All the other gospels dwell on it quite a bit. Not Luke whose gospel paints as pleasing and non-controversial of a picture of Jesus and his followers as he can. Luke doesn't want Jesus to be seen as the big disrupter, but it's pretty difficult to wade into the Temple

area during a pilgrim season and cause a ruckus among the moneychangers, and not call it a big disruption.

The incident with the moneychangers at the Temple is best understood as Jesus' affront at selling and marketing God's grace and peace. By changing currency from various regions and providing exchanges, the moneychangers facilitate the purchase of mandated offerings and sacrifices and the like at the Temple. Of course, they take a cut for themselves. The whole idea that God's love for his people could be bought and sold threw him into a rage.

But the passage closes with Jesus returning to the Temple to teach. What he was teaching wasn't necessarily contrary, but it's clear that he was stirring up trouble, emphasizing things that the priests and scribes would deal with differently. The leaders wanted to catch him in a corrupt or compromised teaching, and maybe they did. But it says that the people were so enrapt by his teaching that the opportunity to cart him off never came about. They didn't want to cause a scene.

These disruptive types usually rambled on and on and eventually people would tire and move on. Once the audience was gone, a couple of guards could whisk away the offender, never to be seen or heard again. But with Jesus, the people stuck around. Too many were there to make any confrontation. To act now could provoke a riot.

Jesus doesn't teach about obedience to the Law, to be Law-abiding people, about the right performance of sacrifices, or about need to be righteous and scrupulous in one's dealings with others. He teaches about love and compassion, about justice and peace, and about the new life promise of God. His teachings are powerful, accurate, and disrupt and disturb the approved message.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem begins the countdown to his arrest and crucifixion. The powers of the empire and its beholden servants are keeping their eyes upon him. His disruption is intolerable and he must be stopped. There is only one way that such figures get stopped.

We're reminded that Jesus' words and teachings are a challenge to the commonplace and orderly ways that we assume to be true and valid and they way things are supposed to be. When the gospel loses that edge and merely becomes a trite salve of acceptance of the way things are, then its vitality is lost. With its disruptive spirit exorcised, the gospel can be accommodated to mean anything we want, even validating the worst.

As we celebrate the parade of palms and procession of exuberant disciples, we should always remember that Jesus has come to disrupt the pleasant party, not to be its entertainment. Let this Holy Week be a reminder of the disruptive confrontation that is God's good news promise, for the kingdom always wrestles with the empire.