

## **Sermon: The Mighty Palm and the Wonder Cloak**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, April 2, 2023)

Before I begin, I shall give credit where credit is due. This sermon is inspired by Katie Hines-Shah, pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church in Hinsdale Illinois, in an article published in The Christian Century magazine, on March 26, 2020, titled “The Church out of the world”

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The date of October 9, 1989 will always be remembered as the day when the regime of East Germany (GDR) became undone. It was a Monday, as peaceful protesters gathered at the courtyard of St. Nicholas Church in the city of Leipzig. 70,000 of them would gather that day, and they would march to the headquarter of Stasi, the East German secret police, while holding lit candles in their hands.

This story all began seven years prior in 1982, during the height of the Cold War. Pastor Christian Führer of St. Nicholas Church had this crazy idea. He gathered a small group of his parishioners to pray for peace.

East Germany existed at that time, under dictatorship firmly within the grasp of the former Soviet Union. The country existed right in the middle of two blocs of nuclear saturated super powers, who had amassed an ungodly amount of firepower against one another, ready to execute the unholy policy of MAD, or Mutual Assured Destruction, that is to fire enough nuclear warheads against each other, that could destroyed everyone on the planet earth, four times over.

East Germany was an atheist state. Although religious practices were not outlawed, they were nevertheless frowned upon by the state, so gathering of a prayer group could be somewhat a risky endeavour. Few attended at first. They met every Monday, at St. Nicholas Church, praying for peace.

Of course, Stasi sent plain clothed observers to record everyone who attended. Those observers were even invited into the prayer meeting by the pastor, to prove the gathering was a-political and non-threatening. A few of the participants eventually applied to leave East Germany, and was granted permission to do so as they were seen by GDR as somewhat of troublemakers, and good riddance.

Words soon got out that participating in this prayer group could be a channel to get out of the country legally, so the group grew in size. That really ticked off the GDR as they began to exercise oppressive tactics to discourage this prayer group, but to no avail. Every Monday, crowd gathered at the courtyard of St. Nicholas Church, to pray for peace, and it grew and grew.

On that particular Monday of October 9, 1989, words got out that a detachment of 8,000 heavily armed police and security personnel were to be deployed against the crowd. Some stayed away, but others were more eager than ever to join. The pastor had call on participants to come without weapons or gas masks, armed only with candles. That's crazy right? What hope could there be for those holding candles against those wielding sub-machine guns?

The crowd that greeted Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem triumphantly, was equally ill prepared. They were waving palm branches and laying down cloaks to welcome Jesus. That really paled in comparison to the unholy trio of Caiaphas, Herod and Pilate.

Caiaphas was the High Priest backed by the authority of the Scripture, tradition and the temple guards. Herod was the King, backed by the dubious bloodline of the Hasmonean dynasty, and a contingent of soldiers at his disposal. Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of the region of Judea, backed by the Empire and the Roman Legion, armed with breastplates, shields, sword and spears.

Against such an array of powers and principalities, what was the crowd thinking? Did they think they were holding in their hands, some sort of magical devices from the Marvel comics or the DC Universe, of **the Mighty Palm and the Wonder Cloak**? What chance did they have, what hope could there be?

Days earlier, Pontius Pilate would've entered Jerusalem on horseback, accompanied by a detachment of Roman Legion. According the Josephus, the Jewish historian of the 1st century, this cunning Roman prefect / governor of the province of Judea had been busy only recently putting down seditious and rebellious Jews in multiple uprisings elsewhere. A major Jewish festival, such as the Passover in Jerusalem, where incoming pilgrims regularly outnumber local residents by a wide margin, it was a recipe ripped for more trouble. Pilate and his armed-to-the-teeth troop would need to be ready to act, to crack down.

Make no mistake about it, protest was on the mind of the crowd and it was on the mind of Jesus, as the Lord rode into town on the back of a donkey's colt. The palm branches, the cloaks, and riding on the back of donkey, were all symbolic gestures of welcoming a king into the capital. The shout of Hosanna in the Aramaic language literally means 'Save us!'. It comes straight out of Psalm 118: 25-26, "*Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.*"

According to the Gospel account of Matthew 21, *the whole city was in turmoil, as people were asking "Who is this?" "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."* The message could not have been more clear. The crowd had embraced Jesus as the long awaited Messianic king, who was sent by the Lord God, to usher in the Kingdom of God, first by tearing down the Empire of Rome. It was a protest, peaceful or not, it was certainly seditious, and the whole city of Jerusalem waited in bated breath.

The crowd that gathered in front of the St. Nicolas Church grew that day of October 9, 1989. The group began to march through the city of Leipzig, and it grew to an unreliable size of 70,000, in a city with total population of no larger than 1/2 a million. The heavily armed police repeatedly dialled up their chain of command, requesting permission to fire on the crowd, but surprisingly, that permission never came.

What started as a pray group became a movement, with nothing but lit candles in their hands. The 70,000 protesters ended their march in front of the Stasi headquarter that evening, no blood was shed, none were arrested. It was a peaceful protest after all, and it was the beginning of the end of GDR.

The following Monday, the same protest in Leipzig grew to the size of 120,000 people. The Monday after that, 320,000, and other cities of East Germany caught on and joined in as well. A few weeks after that, the Berlin Wall fell, and the world was never the same. **Prayer and protest, what a powerful combination.**

I don't want to give the false impression that peaceful protests always succeed in toppling oppressive regimes. They do not. At around the same time of that protest in Leipzig, another group of students protested peacefully in Tiananmen Square, China. We all saw what happened to that.

Palm Sunday protesters in Jerusalem knew that. Their prayer was not directed at Caiaphas, or Herod, or Pilate. They appealed to Jesus, the Son of David, with shout of Hosannas, save us, O Lord, have mercy on us. As

the psalmist reminds us in Psalm 100:5, “For the Lord is good; his mercy endures forever and his faithfulness to all generations.”

Psalm Sunday worshippers everywhere would do well to remember these things whenever we proclaim our Hosannas. **Mighty Palm and Wonder Cloak** are no match for the power of this world, but the power of this world pales in comparison to the mighty power of God.

There is a replica of a pillar at the square outside St. Nicholas Church. An inscription at the base reminds future generations of the events of October 9, 1989, and it reads, “The day the church came out into the world.”

It so happens during the upcoming Holy Week, an inter-faith protest is planned for this coming Monday, in solidarity with the Uyghurs minorities who are being oppressed by the Chinese Government. Details are in this week’s bulletin. It so happens also that a Lectio Divina prayer group is planned for this coming Wednesday. Details are also in the bulletin. Come out and join us. Of course, we are also worshipping on Good Friday. Details of that service are, once again, in the bulletin. Just so you know, I didn’t plan this, I am not that smart. It is the work of the Spirit of God, that all these should happen in the most holy week of the Christian calendar.

Psalm Sunday calls us to join in God’s work outside the church walls, relying not on the power of what we hold in our hands, but solely on the one who calls us out and sends us forth. Who knows, God may still have use for the Church, after all.

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**