

The church out in the world (Matthew 21:1-11)

In October of 1989, word came down from Moscow: the peace prayers in Leipzig must be stopped.

by [Katie Hines-Shah](#)

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Some years ago I met a pastor of St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig in what was once East Germany. During the Cold War, East Germans knew their country lay directly in the path of potential nuclear cross fire. The people were so powerless they did a crazy and ridiculous thing. They decided to go to church and pray.

That's where St. Nicholas came in. On Monday evenings a small group of people, usually no more than ten, would gather in the church to pray for peace. Government officials took notice. They infiltrated prayer meetings and looked for signs of revolution. The pastor told me he was careful to cut the microphone if anyone started to sound "too political." He didn't want the church to get fined or the prayer meeting to be shut down.

When some prayer group members applied for permission to relocate to West Germany, officials quickly granted the requests, glad to be rid of potential malcontents. But the plan backfired when word spread of this new way to emigrate. Tens and then hundreds and finally more than a thousand people started attending weekly peace prayer meetings, not just at St. Nicholas but at all the churches of Leipzig. It became a movement too big to ignore.

In October of 1989, word came down from Moscow: the peace prayers must be stopped. Troops from other states were sent to Leipzig to ensure soldiers wouldn't

balk if ordered to shoot. Leipzig schoolchildren were told by their teachers not to attend the prayer meeting on October 9. The pastor's wife begged him to stay home.

But he did something else instead. He asked people to come to the prayer meeting not with weapons or gas masks but with candles. People thought he was crazy—what good could candles do against the might of the Soviet army?

The people gathered to greet Jesus riding into Jerusalem seem similarly ill prepared. We remember the crowds carrying palms, even though only John's Gospel uses that specific designation. Matthew writes that the crowd "cut branches from the trees." These are no match for the forces arrayed against them. The temple priests have scripture and tradition. The Roman officials have their laws and armies. The centurion soldiers have their breastplates and helmets and, most importantly, their swords and spears. What chance do the people have to stop or sway the powers of the world with only branches in their hands?

They have no chance. Which is perhaps why Matthew writes that they lay their branches down on the ground, along with their garments. Nothing will protect them but the decency and mercy of other people. The people yell, "Hosanna," a foreign word that rings militant or even laudatory in our untrained ears. But Hosanna doesn't mean anything like that. What it really means is "save us."

Could such a protest really succeed?

The stories of the symbolic actions of the prophets and of the transformative work of saints and reformers remind us that peaceful protest is part of our traditions' history. Gandhi, King, and Mandela prove that nonviolent methods have power. Success in these situations is not instantaneous and certainly isn't guaranteed. There are costs. Peacefully protesting people have been beaten and killed. Leaders of nonviolent movements have been imprisoned and executed. And yet when the people gather in weakness, they can change the world.

St. Nicholas's pastor understood that. He explained his reasoning: "People carrying candles can't be carrying guns; they can't run." Maybe this would protect them from soldiers looking for an excuse to fire.

The evening of Monday October 9, 1989 no one knew what to expect. Would anyone attend prayers with soldiers so close at hand? Would the prayers for peace be

stopped? Would the protests devolve into violence? And then the people started arriving. In twos and threes, in tens and twenties, in St. Nicholas and in all the churches. Seventy thousand people turned out. Their refrain: "We are the people." "No violence." "Come join us."

They say the army commander called Moscow but got no response. When the people spilled out into the Leipzig streets, candles in hand, the troops unexpectedly stood down. And while the Berlin Wall would fall some weeks later, people say that freedom came to Germany that night in Leipzig, thanks to some peaceful people carrying nothing more than candles, hoping for nothing more than mercy.

Of course, it doesn't always turn out this way. Around that same time, tanks mowed down peaceful protestors in Tiananmen Square. Revolutionary movements in Czechoslovakia and Romania ended in blood. Violence resulting from protest isn't limited to times past and places far away. In our own country, recent Native American protests at Standing Rock were met with attack dogs and water cannons. There are limits to human mercy and no guarantee of human justice.

The Palm Sunday protestors know that. Their appeal is not to temple priests, Roman officials, or centurion soldiers. They appeal to Jesus, the "Son of David," to hear their Hosannas and have mercy on them. The psalmist reminds us, "God's mercy endures forever."

Palm Sunday worshipers would do well to remember these things whenever we proclaim our Hosannas. Tree branches and candles are no match for the powers of this world, but the powers of this world are no match for the powers of God.

In Leipzig, in the square outside St. Nicholas, there is a replica of one of the church's iconic pillars. On its base is an inscription commemorating the events of October 9, "The day the church came out into the world." It need not be just one day. Palm Sunday calls us to join in God's work outside the church's walls, relying not on the power of what we hold in our hands but solely in the one who holds us.