

Where Are You Headed?

Palm Sunday is one of my favorite Sundays of the church year. I loved it as a child, singing Hosannas and “All Glory, Laud and honor”; waving palm branches and joining in the Jesus parade. And when you are a child, it just seems like a parade. And for children, that is what it should be.

But for us adults, Palm Sunday is complicated. It’s not just a parade for no reason, but a prelude: a gateway into a week full of challenges, miracles and mysteries.

We have a busy week ahead of us. We will experience the confusion and the fear of the disciples; the betrayal and the tragedy of Judas; the tears and the compassion of the women; the terror and the doubts of Peter as he denies Christ three times. And then we will gather again on Friday to resume the story and watch it to its final conclusion on the cross.

So we are no longer children watching a parade. Palm Sunday has a new meaning for us because we watch it through a window onto Holy Week, with its many ups and downs, twist and turns.

Palm Sunday was not an uncomplicated parade for the people who watched it in Jesus’ day, either. History tells us that there were actually two parades on Palm Sunday.

In their book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus’ Last Days in Jerusalem*, the New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan argue that two processions entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, and that Jesus’ was not the only Triumphal Entry.

Every year, the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate would ride up to Jerusalem from his palace on the coast at Caesarea. He came to be present in the city for Passover – the Jewish Festival that swelled Jerusalem’s population from its usual 50,000 to many times its normal to many times more than that. He came to be where the action is. He came to put on a great big show of power, wealth, and glory. He came, above all, to make sure the Jews didn’t start making any trouble.

Passover commemorates the Jew’s deliverance from the mighty empire of Egypt. The Passover Seder commemorates the bitterness of slavery under an oppressive regime and a sweet taste of freedom from a reign of terror – so you can see why that made the Romans nervous. That’s why Pontius Pilate had to come to Jerusalem, in all of his imperial majesty to remind the Jewish pilgrims that Rome was in charge.

Here is Borg and Crossan’s description of Pontius Pilate’s imperial procession: “A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather, armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: The marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful.”

It is from this background that we watch the Palm Sunday Parade. As Pilate clanged and crashed his imperial way into Jerusalem from the West, Jesus approached from the East – and his parade could not have been different.

He came on a borrowed donkey, not an imperial stallion. He came surrounded by a pretty rag-tag bunch of disciples: tax collectors, fishermen, farmers. He came followed by crowds of

people who had been touched and healed by Jesus. He came followed by men whose blind eyes had been made to see; women who had been healed after years of bleeding; the lame who had found they could walk again; the dead who had been brought to life again. He came surrounded by a cacophony of shouts of Hosanna – which means “save us.”

His was the procession of the humble and meek; the explicitly vulnerable. This Jesus was the governor not of an earthy Imperium, but a leader of a strange kind of kingdom where the last would be first, and the first last; where the meek, not the powerful, inherit the earth; where the kingdom belongs to the peacemakers.

At least these scholars I mentioned before are convinced that Jesus’ parade on this Sunday was a deliberate but a moving display of quiet, non-violent, non-revolutionary power. What we often call the triumphal entry was actually an anti-imperial, anti-triumphal one, a deliberate lampoon of the conquering emperor entering a city on horseback through gates opened in abject submission.

This is the kind of peaceful, but stubborn non-violence that has inspired leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. to Nelson Mandela to Ghandi. The quiet, but utterly fearless, unshakable display of humility, gentleness and commitment to the kingdom of God.

All over the world today, two parades are marching. Maybe you have seen an armored motorcade with a president or world leader in it: a long parade of big black cars, secret service agents; usually the road is blocked off and the whole parade is surrounded by police cars; well, this was something like that. Or maybe you’ve seen pictures in the news of the kinds of military parades that perform for leaders like Kim Jong-Un of North Korea.

Parades of power and might will never go out of style. Neither I suppose will parades of money.

In his commentary, Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow says: “The thing is, in many ways these two things were happening at the same time, the question is which Jesus will we follow, then and now.

I am certain that the Jesus we choose to follow has everything to do with our current state of being. If you have been struggling, feel set aside or ignored, or are experiencing powerlessness or marginalization, any glimpse of gaining back some power or security would not only be welcomed but cheered. I can only imagine that the deeper the struggle, the more vibrant the joy would be at the promise of some relief.

So again, let’s be at the parade, but let’s also be very clear about which Jesus we are cheering on: the militaristic victor or the humble subversive – for either could be born from pent-up frustration and struggle.

For today, this is not a true choice that I hope folks are making. In fact, I hope that many are resisting the wave of Christian nationalism that has been the dominate Christian narrative in our political discourse. Too many are choosing the narrative of Jesus as a wartime victor and choosing a Gospel militarized against anyone who would stray from a litmus test of beliefs, - beliefs that Jesus never actually addressed and beliefs certainly not included in the commandments, that Jesus did speak to us, to love God with all your heart and mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Now that second Jesus, that one who is turning over tables, challenging power and sitting with sinners in order to heal and love, that's the one worthy of a parade.

The people at Jesus parade get what Jesus is saying, that the Way of Peace is the only way, even those who were not a part of this staged demonstration would have remembered the words of the prophet Zechariah, that one would be coming to Jerusalem, humble and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey, he will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations. These people have made their choice, the realm of God over the realm of Caesar. The ways of God over the ways of empire. Their adoration for the peasant Jesus is heartfelt, for life. These people have made their choice: They will not live in fear.

Let's look at our art on the front of your bulletin. It is entitled "Power Play" by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity. She says this about her art: In their book, *The Last Week*, theologians Marcus Borg and John Crossman assert that there were actually two parades occurring simultaneously in Jerusalem on this day. From the east, Jesus entered on a donkey. From the west, the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, entered with an imperial guard. They write: "Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of the empire. The two processions embody the central conflict that led to Jesus' crucifixion."

This image is a meditation on these opposing processions and the embodiment of power. Pilate processes with a pompous display of armor, accompanied by soldiers. For him, power is displayed by superiority, elitism, and weaponry. Later in the week, he will use his power to satisfy the crowds willing Jesus to be crucified, despite not finding any offense to justify it. He uses his power for violence, to appease the status quo.

Jesus enters the city on a donkey with her young colt in tow. He wears no armor, only soft linens. In this image, I imagine if the composition were expanded, Jesus would be kneeling, humbling himself before his disciples as he washes their feet. In Jesus' processional, members of the crowd lay down their coats as a display of humility and honor. This foreshadows the way Jesus will take off his outer robe and tie a towel around his waist to wash his friends' feet. Jesus embodies power through a posture of vulnerability, through caring for those who desperately need love.

Which parade you would join in Jerusalem has a lot to say about your definition of power. If you are quick to place yourself in Jesus parade, I encourage you to pause and consider these questions honestly. When have you aligned yourself with systems or people who have used their power for violence or to uphold the status quo? When have you embodied power through vulnerability and love for your neighbor?

Pilate's parade is still marching today. Just look at billionaires in Detroit, building their empire but expecting the tax payers to continue to subsidize their vision of golden palaces that is a far cry from affordable housing and safe streets. Pilate's parade is still marching when yet another school shooting occurs, children are killed again, the 13th school shooting in three months, and yet our law makers would rather wear AR-15 rifles on their lapels and question the gender identity of the shooter, than deal with the issue of guns, because, as we know, it is the guns. Pilate is still marching when our president sides with those who want to make it almost impossible for migrants fleeing violence to find asylum here. Yes, Pilate's parade is still marching.

But before we despair: The Jesus' parade is still marching on today, here in this very city: the parade that marches to a quiet but unmistakable, unbending, unyielding drumbeat of the kingdom. I see this parade in those who care for those experiencing homelessness, the migrants, the asylum seekers and the vulnerable children of our city. This parade goes marching on any time any one of us, in whatever quiet, humble, modest way, stands up for right, makes a choice for peace, shares what we have, takes pity on another fellow human being and holds out a hand.

And I dare say the parade comes marching through here pretty much every Sunday, as we gather, week in and week out, whether it's a Holy Week or not: when we gather here to sing our Hosannas, to wave our hands and lay down our cloaks and our lives to the one we call Messiah.

Sometimes, we don't look like much. But maybe we look suspiciously like the rag-tag bunch of followers who took up after Jesus, calling his name, touching his cloak, reaching out their hands: ordinary people, taxi drivers, and cleaning women, business people and teachers, families with children in tow, gathering together for no other reason than because we have heard the call of the one who is blessed, who comes in the name of our God. And we too cry every week: Hosanna! Save us!

Listen to this poem by Rev. Sarah Speed entitled "Where are you headed?"

We are trains on a track, moving through life at warp speed.
Please keep all arms and legs inside the moving vehicle at all times.

The years pass like a flipbook, faster than we can absorb,
but the train does not stop.

We press our faces to the windows to try and get a good view
and we ask each other,
"Where are you headed? And there on the train we decide –

we want to head toward the promised day.
We want to head toward crowded tables
and long, healthy lives.
We want to move in the direction of joyful children,
and hopeful communities.
We want to move closer to God
with every mile of track,
and that does not happen by accident.

So it's time to ask, where are you headed
and who's driving that train?

The people at the parade did not fully understand, anymore than we do, what it will mean to follow after this one comes in the name of Peace. But you can see from looking at them that they've chosen their parade, their path, their way. Even as we have. Resistance to empire. Allegiance to God. So come, let us follow. Amen.