

Palm Sunday
March 28, 2021
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I.

When I moved to Winchester, Virginia to serve at First Baptist almost fifteen years ago, I learned very quickly how much my town loves a good parade. Decked out in pink and green, with apple blossoms painted on the streets, the city prepares itself for the festival. Celebrities are invited, people flock to the city from miles around. Floats are decorated and people begin setting out their lawn chairs to mark their territory. A queen is chosen, a grand marshall appears, and bands play and march. For a whole weekend we celebrate as the Apple Blossom Festival shuts down banks and schools and reminds us that spring has arrived, and with it, the blessings of new life, visibly budding out on trees and surrounding us with celebration.

There's another parade in the spring time as well, as the downtown churches gather together to process to the old town mall and onto the old courthouse steps, waving palm branches and singing "All Glory Laud and Honor" on Palm Sunday. We gather back in our places of worship and, at my church, First Baptist, our choir members process down the aisles with singing, taking their places in the choir loft for the annual Palm Sunday Cantata. It's a tradition! It's what we do as we begin to mark this time apart as a Holy Week.

II.

In our Scripture for this morning we find ourselves in another parade as Jesus makes his way into Jerusalem. But, as Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan note, Jesus's parade wasn't the only one that was taking place in the city that day. Every year on Passover, pilgrims would flock to Jerusalem to worship and remember. This Passover celebration was a time when the Jewish people celebrated the ways that their God had delivered and liberated them from the oppressive Egyptian empire long ago. Because the Romans knew what the celebration marked,

the Roman governor of Judea would come to Jerusalem to keep the peace—and to make sure that the citizens didn't get any big ideas about liberating themselves from any other empire any time soon.

So, moving up from Caesarea Maritima from the West, Pilate processed into Jerusalem through the largest gate, the Western Gate, riding on a war horse with calvary, soldiers, banners and troops marching behind him. The streets were cleared and large crowds gathered to watch the display. And none of the pilgrims who had gathered to worship in Jerusalem could miss the point being made: their celebration of the Passover was only happening at the tolerant pleasure of the Roman government.

On the other side of town, another, more rag-tag procession had begun. Jesus rode a colt down the Mount of Olives on the East side of the city, surrounded by a crowd of followers. They spread their cloaks and palm branches ahead of him. Small children were lifted up onto the shoulders of their parents as they greeted him with shouts of “Hosanna” and the treasonous chant, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor, David!”

Pilate rode a war horse through the largest gate into the city, decked out in armor, with banners waving and troops marching behind. Jesus rode a donkey colt, through a small Eastern gate. He wore no armor and was followed by small children waving palm branches instead of banners.¹

There were two parades that day into the city. But they could not have been more different. One was a military display of imperial might. And one was a small protest with a

¹ Borg, Marcus J. and Crossan, John Dominic. *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006, p. 3-5.

poor band of rebels crying out Hosanna. Or, as it is translated from the Hebrew, “Save us! Save us now!”

III.

You see, “Hosanna” is no simple cheer. It is a prayer and a plea. And it paves the way for what will come. For Palm Sunday is a day of contrasts as we are confronted with the choice between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar. We recognize, on this day, that this contrast is central to the story of Jesus’s life and to our understanding of the Gospel. As Borg and Crossan note, “The confrontation between these two kingdoms continues through the last week of Jesus’s life. As we all know, [this week will end with] Jesus’s execution by the powers who ruled his world. Holy Week is the story of this confrontation.”² And Palm Sunday is its beginning.

Two processions made their way into Jerusalem that day. And, as those who seek to be faithful to Jesus today, we are forced to ask ourselves: Which parade are we a part of? As we move through this week, we try to commit ourselves to the way of Jesus. We try to join the band of followers with their palms and their cloaks, their pleas and their prayers. But we know that this will not be an easy road.

If we continue to follow Jesus in this procession, we will join him in an upper room as he talks about betrayal and denial and the way that love looks like humble service. We will watch as he breaks bread and pours out a cup and tells us that they will be reminders for us of his broken body and his shed blood, physical reminders of his suffering love.

If we continue to follow Jesus in this procession, we will gather with him in a garden and watch as he prays and pleads for his life. We will watch as even his most committed followers

² Ibid., 5.

cannot sit and pray with him without falling asleep. We will watch as he is led away, arrested, and betrayed.

If we continue to follow Jesus in this procession, we will follow him all the way to a trial as the cries of Hosanna are drowned out by shouts of “Crucify Him!”

If we continue to follow Jesus in this procession, we will follow him all the way to the cross as crowds who had once gathered to watch a parade now watch an execution.

If we follow Jesus through the end of this week, we will recognize how we, like his first followers and friends, have also denied him, betrayed him, or turned away when the path became too difficult or too dangerous. We will be forced to recognize that when we have been asked to make a choice, we so often have chosen the wrong thing. We have, so often, chosen to attend the wrong parade.

IV.

It is at this moment, on this Palm Sunday, when we are poised with palm branches and shouts of Hosanna, that we are asked to choose. Will we continue along this parade route as it leads us through betrayal, suffering, and death? Will we align ourselves with a God whose power is made perfect, not in might, but in the vulnerability of love? Who comes on the back of a donkey instead of a war horse and whose greatest victory is found not on a battlefield but in an empty tomb?

Will we choose, once again, to follow Jesus?

Like those first followers of Jesus, we don't always know where the path of discipleship will lead us. And perhaps the journey seems too hard right now. We have been beaten down by a strange year when the parades and celebrations that *we* have always known and loved have

been postponed or even canceled. We have been overwhelmed by fear and the news of sickness, suffering, and death. We have come to recognize how fragile everything really is.

So maybe it is easier for us to wave some palm branches and then gather again next Sunday to celebrate the resurrection and skip the rest. Skip the quiet service of Maundy Thursday and the suffering of Good Friday. Skip the choice between the way of Jesus and the way of this world. Maybe it is easier to show up for the parade but ignore the paradox.

And yet... Palm Sunday reminds us that despair and hope will travel together on this road. We will despair at the brokenness of our world and of our lives. And we will place our hope in the one who travels alongside us. The one who leads us onwards in this strange parade.

“Hosanna!” we cry. “Save us!” we pray. And then, picking up our cloaks and our crosses, we make our way behind Jesus. Knowing that he already has traveled this road before. And he knows how to lead us in this parade as we move from pain to praise, from suffering to salvation, from death to life everlasting.

Amen.

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