



Palm Sunday, Apr. 5, 2020

Two Parades: Which Will You Join?
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Mark 11:1-11 NRSV

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ²and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.' " ⁴They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" ⁶They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

¹¹Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Jerusalem was the destination for Jesus and his disciples. They'd been *on the way* from Galilee for several weeks: walking, talking, exploring the kingdom of God. More than anything, Jesus had been teaching, and the disciples had been struggling with on-the-go learning of what it means to follow.

The Gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus and his band of disciples approached Jerusalem from the village of Bethany. It was just a couple of miles to the east. This morning, with the help of photography from Zumbro's own Phil Quanbeck, and a little imagination on our part, perhaps we can picture what that first Palm Sunday was like.

The walk down the Mount of Olives is dramatic and moving. [Slide 1] From the top, one gets a panoramic view of Jerusalem. You can spot the locations of many of the

events of Jesus' final week: [slide 2] the majestic Temple Mount for sacrifices and prayer; [slide 3] the secluded Upper Room for footwashing and the Last Supper; [slide 4] the path through Kidron Valley to the main part of the city; [slide 5] the olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane for a time of testing and prayer.

Many of the sites are in traditional locations: [slide 6] the place of Jesus' trial and scourging before Pontius Pilate; [slide 7] the Church of the Holy Sepulcher commemorating where Jesus was crucified; [slide 8] a garden tomb that might have looked a little like the one in which Jesus was buried.

As you can probably tell from the pictures, Jerusalem is a city set on a hill. In ancient Jewish lore, all roads led to Jerusalem, and they all ran uphill. [slide 9] Picture the city of 2000 years ago, with cobblestone streets, and a gleaming temple. [slide 10] That temple, of course, was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, and it's now the location of the Dome of the Rock in Islam. Picture the city teeming with 200,000 pilgrims from all over the world come to celebrate Passover. There's excitement in the air.

Into this city comes a parade. It starts on the west side of town. It's an imperial procession, bringing in the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Pilate doesn't live in Jerusalem, but rather 60 miles to the west in Caesarea Maritima. Caesarea is a new and splendid city, built on the Mediterranean Sea. It's much more pleasant than Jerusalem which is inland, partisan, and often hostile. Pilate knows he needs to be in Jerusalem for the week of Passover. Anything can happen during Passover. It's Christmas and Easter rolled into one. It's the celebration of Israel's defining story—how God delivered the Israelites from slavery to an oppressive power; in those days that power was Egypt.

Today's imperial parade is a demonstration of Roman power and glory. Whether you like Rome or not, you can't miss it: drums pounding, soldiers marching, horses, chariots, an army in procession. Their swords and shields are polished and ready. The show of force is designed to suppress any thoughts of rebellion during Passover. You can picture the eyes of onlookers: some are curious, some are impressed, many are deeply resentful.

This parade is not only a display of Roman military might, but also a display of Roman imperial theology. According to this theology, the emperor is not simply the ruler of Rome; he is the son of god. Inscriptions proclaim him "lord" and "savior." On top of everything, he's credited with bringing "peace on earth."

From the opposite side of town, the east side, comes a second parade. It's probably no coincidence that Jesus picks this location and this day. He wants to send a message to the powers that be. [slide 11] He secures a donkey and rides it down the Mount of Olives, cheered on by his followers. [slide 12] They spread their cloaks on the ground and wave palm branches before him. They shout hosanna, which means "Save us." One wonders what they want saving from, and how. Jesus is nothing like the Roman governor. He's from the lowly village of Nazareth, his message is centered on the kingdom of God, and his followers are mostly peasants.

Unlike the powerful Roman army, Jesus has a ragtag group he has picked up along the way. They follow him into town. Don't get the idea that Jesus climbs up on the donkey because he's tired. Jesus walks everywhere. This move is symbolic. According to the prophet Zechariah, ancient kings like David had entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey. It was a way of sending a very different message, a message of humility. Though Mark doesn't quote it directly, Zechariah 9 would have been on the parade-goers' minds: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey." Psalm 118 would have also been on their minds: "Hosanna! O Lord, save us! Form a procession with branches up to the corner of the altar."

Clearly, this parade is nothing like Rome's, but there is a festive tone to it, and maybe a hint of revolution. We don't know what Jesus is thinking, but the stage has been set. The last week of Jesus' life has begun. People have been praying for deliverance. And the cry *Hosanna* is about to be answered, though hardly in a manner that anyone suspects...or maybe even wants.

With the benefit of hindsight, we know that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is the beginning of the end. Talk of an upstart king is bound to stir up trouble. *Who is this rabbi from Galilee? What sort of king could he be?* Before the week is out, a few might quietly hail him as "Savior" and "Lord," and even "Son of God." But the crowds will prove fickle, and when Jesus disappoints expectations, the shouts of adoration will quickly turn to jeers and cries to *crucify him*.

So, what do you think, which parade would have gotten your attention that day? This question might sound simplistic, but it's not meant to be. Truth be told, it would have been hard to miss the imperial procession, the one with power and might. Who doesn't like to witness grandeur? On the flip side, it would have been easy to miss the peasant parade. A few Galileans had cooked up some wild and crazy dreams, but those dreams wouldn't add up to anything, would they? What kind of king chooses humility? What kind of kingdom operates on kindness and love? What are we to make of King Jesus? How much power is there in love? Back in 1957, Martin Luther King was wrestling with this in his Christmas sermon. He said: "You can bomb our homes and threaten our children and hurt us, but we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And we will love you. We will love you until that day comes when finally we win you over. When we do, we will have a double victory, for you will be changed and our world will be changed too."

Paul's Christ hymn in Philippians 2, from which we read earlier, points us in the direction of Christ's love. Paul writes, in effect: "Don't only look out for yourselves, but for others too. Have the mind of Christ, who didn't take advantage of his divine status, but emptied himself, taking on the role of a servant to all, even to his death on the cross."

Humility is at the heart of Christ's self-emptying love. Humility is the character of Jesus. He arrives on the scene, not as conquering hero, but as Prince of Peace, one willing to lay down his life.

As followers of Jesus, we have the mind of Christ. That's what Paul asks of us. We have an opportunity to demonstrate Christ's humility and kindness toward others. We can do this anytime, of course, but our world desperately needs it now. The coronavirus is giving us all sorts of ways to empty ourselves. It starts with staying home. We close ourselves off from others, even if we're feeling good; and we do it just as much for their sake as for ours. We practice physical distancing. We don't panic-buy, but allow others to get what they need as well.

Don't only look out for yourselves, but for others too. We have plenty of chances to connect with others: 1) a phone call to check on an old friend; 2) an email or text or an old-fashioned letter to let someone know you've been thinking of them, and are praying for them; 3) a pen pal note from one of the children or youth at Zumbro - be sure to write them back.

If you do choose to leave the house - and I would encourage you to be very careful about it - let it be an opportunity to serve. It might mean going to the front lines of health care, day after day, and caring for the sick. It might mean picking up a few groceries and supplies for a neighbor who's in a higher risk group. It might mean making burritos for Open Table to feed those who could use a meal. It might mean organizing school lunches for kids who might otherwise go hungry. It might mean making a donation to our Good Samaritan Fund to help a Zumbro family who's in a tough stretch. And, in all these cases and more, consider wearing a mask to protect yourself and others from spreading the virus.

I keep going back to Michael Osterholm of the University of Minnesota: We're not experiencing a MN blizzard; we're experiencing yet another MN winter. Friends, this calls for endurance. I *will* say this: we Minnesotans might be better at this than most. We know about winter, and hunkering down, and staying home. And beyond this, we Minnesota Lutherans might be better equipped as well. In a strange sort of way, we tend to like the season of Lent—it's just going to last a little longer this year. We're used to giving up things for Lent, and maybe adding a dose of humility and kindness. And we know what it feels like to get down on our knees in prayer. People, we will get through this winter...and this Lent!

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is the beginning of a very special week - a Holy Week - that's at the heart of our story. We need this week. Whether we have palms in our hands or not, we cry out: "Lord, save us from oppressive power, whether it be Egypt or Rome or Covid-19. Lord, show us how to serve in a way appropriate to this time and place. Lord, touch us with your amazing love."

Friends, this Palm Sunday, hopefully your choice of parade is the one following after Jesus and his ragtag band of disciples. It's not grand. No, it's a parade grounded in humility, and kindness, and sacrificial love.

As we follow along on this parade, it's important to remember that Christ's self-emptying was not the end of his deity; rather it was the fullest expression of it. Indeed, Christ reveals the kindness, humility, and love of God toward us all, and toward a world that so badly needs it now. Amen.