

“Choose Your Parade”

Palm Sunday – Lent 6B-18

Philippians 2: 5-11

Mark 11: 1-11

3/25/18

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Following yesterday—a day in which so many, including our own TPC youth and quite a few members participated in a march—it may be strangely fitting that we read about another, albeit very different sort of march in Scripture. Of course, we retell the tale of this march every year on Palm Sunday. It’s known as the Palm Sunday Parade. And for good reason. As one of just a few stories all four gospels proclaim, there’s something critical going on as Jesus finally made his way into the great and holy city of Jerusalem.

I mean, this was the march that set it all up.

This was the parade that set the stage for the next five days—the last of Jesus’ earthly life.

This was the march that brought Jesus face to face with the political and religious powers that be.

For this was the parade in which Jesus officially called out the abusers.

This was the parade that clarified the boundary between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Caesar.

As this was the parade that proclaimed the way of God could not be more different than the way of the Earthly Empire.

You see, as scholars Marcus Borg and Dominik Crossan explain in their landmark work, *The Last Week*,¹ Jesus’ Palm Sunday parade wasn’t the only parade in Jerusalem that Sunday. A very different parade was happening at the same time on the other side of town. A grand military parade heralding the arrival of Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea. Evidently, the Roman Emperor Caesar had sent Pilate to Jerusalem that week, instructing him to keep the peace amid the bustling city.

For Caesar and Pilate both understood that *this* was the week of Passover—one of the holiest days of the Jewish calendar. But not just that. Passover was the time Israel celebrated how their people had once been liberated from their oppressors in Egypt, freed unto a new land God provided for them.

So the Empire didn’t want their Jewish subjects getting any foolish ideas—like pursuing freedom or beginning a revolt. So Caesar sent Pilate to make sure that Jerusalem stayed in line.

And that’s saying something. For the Romans didn’t usually worry too much about the Hebrew people. The Empire had been subjugating Israel for many generations by then. The Jewish people were used to it. They resented it, make no mistake. But they were used to it. They were used to the political and religious corruption.

¹ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus’s Final Week in Jerusalem* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

For Rome had learned long ago that the best way to control the Hebrew people was to control their High Priest, and his chief priests. The Empire understood—these were the men who stood at the top of the Hebrew hierarchy. For the High Priest and his Chief Priests were the ones who controlled the great and holy Jerusalem Temple—the site Hebrews believed contained the presence of God—the site every faithful Jew was supposed to travel to at least once a year to atone for their sins by offering a sacrifice unto the Lord.

What's more, the High Priest was the one who had the authority to bring religious charges against fellow Jews—the one with the ability to charge a fellow Jew not with a criminal offense, but a religious offense.

So again, the Roman Empire controlled Israel, in many way, simply by controlling the High Priest and his chief priests. Rome let the chief priests rule with religious authority, as long as the chief priests made sure Rome got every penny they required.

As such, the High Priest of Jesus' day—Caiaphas—had an admittedly impossible job to do. He had to simultaneously keep the Hebrew people and the Roman Empire happy. But how do you that when the Jews detested their Roman occupation?

Well, the chief priests accomplished this by limiting those who had access to the temple. Play by their rules, and you got in. Don't play by their rules, and you couldn't access the Temple. They even charged the people a fee to go inside the temple and see a priest. Just as they charged everyone a fee to purchase animals that were needed amid sacrificial rites of forgiveness. So in a very real way, the chief priests charged every Jew a fee for doing what they said had to be done.

But if that wasn't bad enough—in the Temple, you could only use Jewish currency. Not Roman currency. So the temple priests charged a fee to change money over from one currency to another—thereby squeezing even more of a profit out of the Hebrews... all so that the Chief Priests could make sure that the Empire got their cut of the profits, while the Hebrew people could have access to what the priests said they had to do.

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These were the political and religious systems of Jesus' day. This was the way Jesus' people lived—subjects of the Roman Empire and the corruption of the religious and temple authorities.

And to put it plainly, Jesus detested it. Jesus detested how the Empire oppressed the people. He detested how the Roman Empire had built itself up amid an economic system that gave wealth and power to only a select few while neglecting the needs of the masses and the peasant class, in particular.

And he hated how the Hebrew religious hierarchy had grown so culpable within it all. He detested how the chief priests used their religious authority to justify the Empire's practices, going so far as to including the holy temple in their oppressive schemes.

I mean, if Jesus had made anything clear throughout his three-year ministry to this point, it was that he came to reveal a God who favors the last and the least, not the in-charge and powerful. And by Palm Sunday, Jesus had no more patience for any system that said otherwise.

So Jesus very meticulously, very intentionally planned his parade that Palm Sunday. You see, Jesus knew that Jerusalem would explode from its normal 40,000 residents to the almost

200,000 total of people who came to Jerusalem for Passover. So he also knew that the Empire would be sending Pontius Pilate to town to ensure everyone behaves by the rules. Heck, Jesus even knew the way in which Pilate would be entering Jerusalem—amid a great and grand military parade sure to catch everyone’s attention. I mean, that’s the way the empire always did it. Jesus had seen it before. Rome wanted to remind everyone exactly who was in charge.

So Jesus knew Pilate would be riding in on his grand stallion, flanked by a legion of his finest soldiers wearing their leather armor, sitting atop their horses. And Jesus knew they would then be followed by a battalion of foot soldiers, all carrying shields and weapons to display the amount of force the Empire could wield if it had to. It was a parade designed to strike both fear and awe into the Hebrew people that day. It was the Empire’s way of saying: “You can celebrate your Passover festival, but don’t forget who’s in charge!”

So Jesus made sure his parade couldn’t be more different. It’s why he didn’t ride a horse... or even a donkey, according to Mark. Rather, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a colt—a young donkey, not yet full-grown. And those who followed him wore no armor and carried no weapons; they had nothing but the tattered clothes on their backs.

For Jesus made sure his parade stood out in contrast to the Empire’s parade. He demonstrated humility in the face of power and might. Just as revealed a way of non-violence in the face of the most violent power the world had yet known.

And yet ... as the two parades competed for the people’s attention, the gospels seem to agree that it was Jesus’ pathetic parade that garnered more interest than Pilate’s mighty military parade. To be sure, Jesus certainly got the attention High Priest Caiaphas, who immediately realized he had to do something to shut Jesus’ up. For Caiaphas had heard what the Hebrews were screaming as Jesus rode through town that day. “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!”

It might not sound like it to you and me amid our modern-day English ears, but the cries of the people were nothing short of revolutionary. “Hosanna! Save us, Jesus! You’re the One sent by God to deliver us! Hosanna! Save us from Rome! Save us from Caesar! Restore us as our own nation! Free us from these shackles of oppression so we can be God’s free and holy people once again! Hosanna, Jesus! Save us!”

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The week that follows, friends... all of it...

Monday—Jesus cleansing the temple of the money changers

Tuesday and Wednesday—Jesus challenging the religious authorities and teaching the crowds more and more about the kingdom of God

Thursday—the Passover festival itself, and Jesus’ last supper

Friday—Jesus before Pilate himself

All of it... Jesus does all of it to directly confront the religious and political powers of his day.

It’s why the marking of the Palm Sunday Parade each year is so important for the church. We need to remember and retell *why* Jesus came into town riding on a donkey. We need to remember and retell:

Why he was so determined to speak truth to power.

Why he was so determined to reveal humility in the face of might.

Why he was so determined to model service in the face of greed.

Why he was so determined to reveal God's love for the last and least, amid a political and religious system that couldn't have cared less about either.

We need to remember why he confronted the religious and political authorities with the kingdom of God!

So while I know there are many—many good and faithful people who believe that the pulpit is not a place where faith and politics should mix—on a day like today, friends, I don't know how they can't. In truth, when we consider the totality of Jesus' ministry and the reason he was killed, I'm not sure how we ever separate faith from politics—not when Jesus calls us to view all of life—all of life—through the lens of his gospel?

Now, as I share that, please understand... this doesn't mean I think the church should be partisan... nor does it mean I think the pulpit is a place to advocate for one party over another. Not at all. But for me... I believe that when Jesus calls us to live all of life from the way he has shown us, I believe it means all of life.

And on this day, in particular, I believe there's simply no escaping it. For here—at the outset of Holy Week—as we retell the tale of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, he asks us again to choose. Which parade do we want? Which way will we seek?

From the west there's the way of this world entering with shining armor and grand regalia. And from the east there's the kingdom of God entering on a pathetic little donkey. According to Mark, the contrast couldn't be more profound. And the consequences of our choice couldn't be more real.

Which parade do we choose? Amen.