

“Palms, Parades, and Power”
Texts: Psalm 118:19-29, Luke 19:28-40
The Reverend Christopher A. Henry
Morningside Presbyterian Church
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“As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road.” Luke 19:36

Who says that straight-laced, stiff Presbyterians can't let loose and celebrate? Thank you, Walter. In case you missed it, this morning's worship service began with a parade! As you entered church today, you were handed party favors. We may not have been throwing candy or riding floats, but there was no mistaking this festive atmosphere.

Today traffic on Ponce de Leon Avenue is impeded not by fit and healthy marathon runners but by devout Christians waving branches. It must be Palm Sunday. I cherish this day on the church calendar. It was on a Palm Sunday five years ago that I began as seminary intern at Morningside. I remember the splendor of that service and I remember being overwhelmed by the authenticity of the community and warm welcome I received from this congregation. I remember being greeted on the front sidewalk by Ruthlyn Newell with a palm branch and a kind word. Everyone seemed so cheerful and expectant. Who wouldn't love a day that begins with such celebration, a day on which we sing together:

All glory, laud, and honor
To thee, Redeemer, King!
To whom the lips of children
Made sweet hosannas ring.

Sweet hosannas indeed. Even to small children, Palm Sunday is a day that makes sense. Of course the people of Jerusalem would line the streets to welcome Jesus to town. Of course they would shout in unison, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” Of course they would spread out their cloaks in front of him and clear the way for his entrance. In a scene fit for Disney's *Aladdin*, Jesus receives a royal welcome when he enters the Holy City. Luke tells us that the people lining the streets were praising God for the mighty deeds of power that they had seen from Jesus. I think this is what makes so much sense about Palm Sunday: the multitude of joyfully raised voices, the possibility of shouting stones, the majesty and enthusiasm—the **power** of this palm-punctuated passionate parade. The power of it all.

The meaning of power has been a central part of this story since the very beginning. Do you remember how Luke's gospel starts? A powerless young woman in a small town called Nazareth receives a visit from a messenger of God. The remarkable news is that

she will give birth to a son who will rule a kingdom that will never end. A kingdom that will never end? Now that is power!

But Mary's response to Gabriel's prophecy is even more revelatory: she praises God with a song; and in that song Mary proclaims, "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly." Early in the gospel, we receive the message that this king and this kingdom will privilege power of a different sort.

Luke's story continues and, after his baptism, Jesus is driven into the wilderness. There his ministry begins with forty days of fasting and prayer. It is this "wilderness time" that we observe during Lent each year, when Jesus is tempted to gain worldly power: the devil shows Jesus in an instant the kingdoms of the world, and offers to him authority over them all. Now that is power! But Jesus refuses. His is a different kind of power. The power of hospitality and table fellowship; the power of healing; the simple power of kindness and mercy.

And now, at Passover, Jesus chooses to come into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, the very manner that the prophet Zechariah had predicted the Messiah would come: "humble and lowly is he, riding on a donkey." The crowds of people who saw it recognized immediately what Jesus was claiming. Their savior had come. And so they tore branches from the trees and the coats from their back, and they shouted praise to God and to Jesus himself.

According to Matthew, Mark, and John, the word that is on their lips is the same one that has been on ours this morning: Hosanna, a Hebrew expression that means, "Save us!" Save us from the crushing weight of the Roman Empire on our backs. Save us from religious persecution and social alienation. Save us from marginalization and oppression. The crowd that gathers around Jesus is well aware of the symbolism of this moment, and they long to be saved by this one who will, they pray, wrestle the throne away from Herod. So they shout, Hosanna! Save us!

To the people of both religious and political power in Jerusalem, these are fighting words, a threat to the status quo. As the crowds of shouting people careened from nationalism to wild-eyed religious fervor and back again, these leaders became nervous. What if the parade became a revolt?

Imagine the scene as it could have unfolded. Jesus rides all the way to the palace where he is enthroned immediately by the masses following him. His coronation ends the oppression of the Jews under the Roman Empire and brings all suffering to an end. Jesus rides all the way to the temple where he takes his rightful place as Lord and establishes a heavenly kingdom on earth and every knee bows and every tongue confesses. It is the way we might write the scene ourselves. But for Jesus, whose birth far from Jerusalem was hardly noticed by the powerful king, who constantly refused to accept power on human terms, violent takeover is not how the story ends.

In many ways, I wish it were. The advantage of such an ending is obvious—we can have Palm Sunday parades and Easter celebrations without the messiness of the intervening week. Joy without sacrifice. Victory with no pain.

As one writer confesses, “I don’t have the right personality for Good Friday, for the crucifixion. I’d like to skip ahead to the resurrection. In fact, I’d like to skip ahead to the resurrection vision of one of the kids in our Sunday school, who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny outside the tomb; everlasting life and a basketful of chocolates. Now you’re talking”[\[i\]](#)

But this most paradoxical day of the church calendar does not give us the option of trading palms for lilies without pause. Because by the end of today’s service, which started with such promise, we will be bracing ourselves for Holy Week and the journey to the cross. The joyful parade will soon take a dramatic and ominous turn.

New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan begin their book, *The Last Week*, with the striking observation that there were actually two processions entering Jerusalem on the day we call Palm Sunday. You see, it was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year.

The authors write, “One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class. They had journeyed to Jerusalem from Galilee, about a hundred miles to the north...(the) story of Jesus and the kingdom of God has been aiming for Jerusalem, pointing toward Jerusalem. It has now arrived.

On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor...entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. (His presence was meant to keep the peace, keep order). Jesus’ procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate’s proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus’ crucifixion.” [\[ii\]](#)

Where does ultimate power lie? Which procession should we join? Who will save us?

Throughout this Lenten season, as we have examined the parables of Jesus, we have watched our expectations of power and divinity turned on their head. We have been surprised to find that we follow a Lord whose kingdom is not one of coercion or domination. In this kingdom there is enough room for the left behind and the forgotten. In this kingdom we all find ourselves on level ground at the foot of the cross. In this kingdom, power is defined by humble servant hood. Imagine that. Imagine the impact the church, defined by the power of humble servant hood, could have on our culture of

hostility and blind pride. The pace to find the essence of power is not on the adorned throne but on the plain cross.

This is the point at which this day becomes most difficult. Rather than marching the streets of Jerusalem, inciting revolution, and taking the crown Jesus' parade path will lead him to tragedy, to the cross.

Do we have to talk about the cross on Palm Sunday? Shouldn't this be a day for celebration? Shouldn't coming to church make us feel good about ourselves? Can't we just revel in the victory without focusing on the pain? No wonder the cross is an endangered species in many so-called Christian churches. The focus should be on happiness and victory, ours and God's.

But then, as Fred Craddock writes, "Sooner or later someone is going to say to you, 'Then what happened to Jesus?' And when you tell them the truth, that he came to the city as a 33-year-old young idealist and stirred the city and the city turned on him and just like that put him on trial and executed him, some people are going to back away. People aren't interested in a man who dies like that. It's a terrible growth strategy for the church, all that, morbid suffering and bleeding and dying."^[iii]

And yet, deep down, don't we know in our own lives that pain is the matrix for newness? Don't we feel the weight of sin and the power of evil even when we try to ignore it? Don't we need to be saved? At Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Overland Park, Kansas, where Sara was raised and where we were married, awkwardly and obstructively positioned in the center aisle, there is a cross on a post. Whether coming or going in that church, you cannot avoid the cross right in front of you.

I want to tell you the truth this Palm Sunday. There is no way around the cross, at least no way that leads to Easter. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (I Corinthians 1:18). The cross, and nothing else, is the power of God.

If we want to know what power truly meant to Jesus, and therefore what it must mean for us, we will have to travel beyond the beauty and festivity of this Palm Sunday. We will have to go beyond the parades and the palms, as poignant as they might be. We will have to go all the way to a hill called Calvary. We will have to stand in the shadow of the cross. Only there will we meet the true, saving and life-giving power of Jesus.

We entered the sanctuary just moments ago waving palms wildly and singing words of jubilation and triumph: "All Glory, Laud, and Honor." We should not forget those words. But those of you who have read ahead in your bulletin know that before we get out of here, we will encounter the cross. We will sing much more somber words: "See, from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down."

That is because it **is** a parade that we participate in this morning, to be sure, but it is one of dramatic and tragic irony. We who have read the gospel story before know that Jesus is walking into a trap. As he enters the temple, we know that there are those following him now who will eventually arrest him in the garden. And so, even our most

ardent efforts at pure joy on this Palm Sunday are blunted by the realization that this is not only a parade. It is also a funeral procession.

If we choose to embrace the truth of this week, the road will be hard. We will walk through the streets of Jerusalem as the tide begins to turn against this prophet. We will see him betrayed by one of his closest friends. We will witness a trial filled with corruption, injustice, and abuse of power. We will climb a hill called Golgotha, the place of the skull, where this funeral procession could have ended. Where the whole world thought it did end.

But another power is at work this week. Listen. Today the people line the streets and they cry out with more desperation than hope, "Hosanna!! Save us!!"

Keep watch. He will.

[i] Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, Riverhead Books, 2005, p. 140.

[ii] Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem*, HarperOne Publishers, 2006, p. 2-3.

[iii] Fred Craddock, *The Cherry Log Sermons*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, p. 78.