

Sermon: Before the Parade Passes By
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 and Mark 11:1-11
Palm Sunday, April 13, 2014
Rev. Julie Wells Blythe

"Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" Mark 11:8-9

In the musical Hello Dolly, Dolly Levi is a widowed matchmaker who finds true love for her clients. During the course of the musical she discovers that since her husband's death she hasn't really been living and realizes it is time to make a change in her own life. When that realization comes, she sings:

"Before the parade passes by
Before it goes on, and only I'm left
Before the parade passes by
I've gotta get in step while there's still time left."¹

During the season of Lent we have been talking about journeys – journeys of the heart and roads not taken. We have all made choices in our lives that have taken us one way or the other. We have watched the parade of life, our own and others, and sometimes we wonder if we have made the right choices.

Today is Palm Sunday. It is the day we remember Jesus riding into Jerusalem as a king. On that day, people put their coats on the road and lined it with palm branches to honor Jesus. They wanted to be part of this new thing that was happening – to be close to the one who was turning the world upside down, one teaching and one miracle at a time. But Jesus wasn't the only parade in town that day. There were two processions which came into Jerusalem.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in their book, The Last Week, speak of these two processions in these words:

Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year. In the centuries since, Christians have celebrated this day as Palm Sunday, the first day of Holy Week. With its climax of Good Friday and Easter, it is the most sacred week of the Christian year.

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, a journey that is the central section and the central dynamic in Mark's gospel. Mark's 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 of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God,

¹ "Before The Parade Passes By" written by Jerry Herman; Charles Strouse; Lee Adams.

Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus' crucifixion.

Try to imagine for a moment these two very different processions. On the one hand, Pilate's procession was a very intentional demonstration of imperial power: "cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. [The] sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. [Imagine] the swirling of dust [and] the eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful.

Remember too that Pilate's procession was not just about imperial power but it was also about imperial theology. "...the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome, but the son of God....[consequently] Pilate's procession embodied not only a rival social order, but also a rival theology."²

In contrast to this, imagine Jesus' procession. He rides into Jerusalem humbly, on a colt. It is not grand like Pilate's or well-guarded by many soldiers like Pilate's. Nor are the sounds the same. In Jesus procession there is only the sound of the people, putting their coats and palm branches in front of him on the road. In contrast to the quiet onlookers at Pilate's parade, these people are shouting "Hosanna, Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

"Jesus was *intentionally setting up a comparison between the violent and powerful trend of the empire and the peaceful and grace-filled trend of the kingdom of God.*"³ Borg and Crossan see the Palm Sunday parade as a kind of pre-planned political protest, and a look at the context seems to back that up. The symbolism of a ruler riding on a donkey would not have been lost on those putting their cloaks in the road, for they would have remembered the words of the prophet Zechariah: an image of a king coming into Jerusalem with shouts of joy from the people. "He is "triumphant" and "victorious" — words that Romans and other imperial leaders would have embraced — but he is "humble" and rides on a donkey instead of a war horse (Zechariah 9:9). In fact, continues the prophet, "He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem." This king is not a conquering hero who uses weapons of mass destruction, but one who will break the power of military might with humility, justice and a "peace" for all the nations (Zechariah 9:10)."⁴

Jesus' parade was an intentional parable and statement of contrast. If Pilate's procession embodied power, violence and the glory of the empire that ruled the world, Jesus' procession embodied the kind of kingdom that God was ushering in through Jesus' ministry of healing, his message of good news and, ultimately, his sacrificial death on a Roman cross.

We have the same choice today that the people did that week so very long ago. We have to choose which road to take, which parade we will be in. We love Jesus and we say that we follow him. But we need to remember what following him really entails. His road is a road of sacrifice, of service to others and it is a road of suffering. The Palm Sunday road, which is actually a road from the Mt. of Olives down into Jerusalem is a path that passes a large, old, ancient cemetery — a cemetery that was there when Jesus walked that road. The fact that the road passes through that cemetery is a clear reminder of where this particular parade leads. From that road walking toward Jerusalem you can see everything. Jesus coming into Jerusalem down that road would have been able to see everything as well - literally and figuratively.

² The Last Week, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, HarperSanFrancisco, pp.2-4.

³ Ibid, p. 4

⁴ Ibid

As we wave our palm branches and shout our hosannas today, we must remember that many of the same people who were doing the same on that Sunday so long ago were gone by the following Friday. When confronted and required to say who they truly were and what they believed, they dropped away. They chose self-preservation over salvation.

The question we have to ask on Palm Sunday is whether we do the same thing when following Christ becomes inconvenient at best or, at worst, seemingly impossible. Following Jesus often means sharing his unpopularity, be it at school, in the workplace or even at home. It means being willing to serve sacrificially and to be willing to give up comfort - material and spiritual. It means being willing to walk the way of peace rather than the way of the world. It is amazing how threatening peace can be. The idea of peace, real peace, threatens the powers that be and it threatens many people. Peace calls for justice and sacrifice and people really don't want to do that. Peace is a threat to the status quo, it is a threat to how things are now. It requires being able to imagine and then act in new ways that will be uncomfortable and will definitely be sacrificial. To follow in Christ's parade is a march to the cross but it is also a march to everlasting life. And like the words in Dolly Levi's song say, "Life without life has no reason or rhyme left." To be part of Jesus' parade we must be willing to give our lives to serve God and humankind. We must be willing to give all for God's way - the way of a God who loved us so much he sent his son who lived a human life and died a human death. We must choose who and how we will follow - before the parade passes by. Amen.