

“Palms and Parades”

Mark 11:1-11

Liturgically speaking, today is not officially Palm Sunday. According to the traditional calendar, Palm Sunday should be next week. However, in recent years, it has become the custom of many churches to celebrate “Passion Sunday” one week before Easter Sunday. My experience has taught me that many people do not attend Good Friday services, and I thought it would be a little strange to preach one Sunday, “Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem,” and the next week, say, “Jesus is risen from the dead!” The average person would be left scratching their head, asking, “Wait, how did he die? A donkey accident?”

However, I feel there is an important message in the Palm Sunday story, and I don’t want to skip it altogether, so my compromise has been to preach both: Palm Sunday gets bumped up a week, and Passion Sunday starts us on the final journey to the cross during Holy Week.

Palm Sunday is about parades. I like parades. I have been in a few with marching bands in high school and college, including the Parade of Roses and our own Rubber Ducky Festival in Bellaire. Parades are fun. The lights, the sirens, the flag waving, and of course, the candy that gets thrown all over the place. People like to join these parades, or at least watch from the sidelines.

There are other parades, however, that people are more reluctant to join. Not really parades, but protest marches. I’m thinking of events like the Civil Rights March on Washington, D.C. in 1963. More recently, there have been demonstrations against gun violence, with students walking out on schools. These “parades” are a response to injustice. These rallies are a challenge to the powers-that-be, demanding change. Nobody throws candy, but they might throw tear gas or punches. Some of these protests can be violent. People can be mocked and ridiculed for joining them.

I have been in more parades than protests. I did participate in a march in college called “Take Back the Night,” which was a rally against domestic violence and specifically brutality against women. When you join an event like that, you need to carefully examine what you stand for. But even more importantly, after the parade is over, you need to still be involved in the cause.

Today I want us to ask, what kind of parade is Palm Sunday? What clues do we find in the scriptures? What was the purpose of this trip to Jerusalem? And do we want to join it?

Let's start with the location. Jesus and his disciples started at Bethany and Bethphage at the top of the Mount of Olives. This is a pretty significant location. The Mount of Olives is a ridge just east of the Old City of Jerusalem, about 300 feet higher than the Temple Mount. The Mount of Olives is an excellent location to take in the panorama of the city. It is also religiously significant. Based on a prophecy from Zechariah 14:4, the Jews believed that the Messiah would appear on the Mount of Olives and march to victory in Jerusalem.

Jesus knew this scripture. He deliberately chose to enter Jerusalem on Palm Sunday from the east, declaring himself the Messiah. However, he also wanted to make clear what kind of Messiah he was. So he sent two of his disciples in to arrange for his transport.

If you want to make a display of power in a parade, you have to choose the right vehicle, like a convertible, a red firetruck, or a hot rod...those are all exciting because they have horsepower. Even today we see equestrian units riding in the parades. Why? Because horses are powerful, tall, and majestic. If you were a military leader in biblical times, like General Pompey or Governor Pilate, you rode into Jerusalem on a white stallion with sword drawn.

Jesus instead chooses a donkey, a small, humble animal. Military leaders rode horses; messengers of peace rode donkeys.¹ Even the way the disciples procure the animal is a clue: Jesus tells his disciples cryptically to go get a colt tied to a post somewhere in the city, and if they encounter any resistance (“Hey, what are you doing with that donkey?”), they are to explain that the Lord needs it and will return it immediately. By contrast, if a king needed a donkey or a horse, he would simply commandeer the animal, with little or no explanation.

So we have Jesus, making a political statement by entering the city from the east, but riding a small animal that is the symbol of humility and peace. A strange sight. Depending on the size of the donkey, Jesus might have been dragging his

¹ Harper-Collins Bible Commentary, p 915.

feet on the ground! He is not carrying a sword or leading an army. What sort of parade is this? What is Jesus doing?

The traditional view is Jesus is making his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. That’s what the title in our pew bibles says. After all, the people make a great show of respect for Jesus. They put their cloaks on the donkey, they cut down branches to wave, and lay other branches and their coats in the street to keep the dust down. This is a happy little parade, right? This is the image we have of Palm Sunday, is it not? We even reinforce this idea of a pleasant, joyful parade in song: “Hosanna, loud, hosanna, the little children sang.” It is a happy day of celebrate. Hosanna!

That is one way to look at it. But I submit to you this is no Bridge Fest. One commentator writes, “There is no possible way to ignore the political implications of the act of Jesus Christ riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.”² Another author, Charles L. Campbell says the story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the back of a colt is “one of the wildest and most politically explosive acts of Jesus’ ministry.”³

In many ways, Jesus mocks the political aspirations of the religious and military powers of his time. He doesn’t climb a horse; Jesus sits on a heap of old clothes on the back of a donkey, with his legs dangling down to the ground. Why? Because Jesus identifies with the poor and meek. Jesus doesn’t just stand by them, he goes with them.

The words the people shout are from Psalm 118, a song of thanksgiving after military victory. Hosanna means “God save us.” The people claim the kingdom of King David is coming. This whole scene is building up to a defiance of powers that be in the capital of Israel, in the most powerful city in the Middle East.

“Jesus’ action...is not of a pretty parade scene with children smiling and laughing and singing and waving palm branches in a sanctuary. This action is political. It is bold. It is divisive. And it is deadly.”⁴ The enemies of Jesus take

² Dawn Chessar, www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/holy-week-2018-worship-planning-series/march-25-2018-passion-palm-sunday/passion-palm-sunday-2018-preaching-notes.

³ Charles L. Campbell, *Exegetical Perspective on Mark 11:1-11 for Palm Sunday, Year B. Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, WORDsearch Edition.*

⁴ Chessar, www.umcdiscipleship.org.

notice. This parade puts into motion the events of Holy Week, the Passion of Christ, that will get Jesus killed.

There is one last detail of this parade that surprises us, even confuses us. As Jesus approaches Jerusalem, his followers hit a wall – literally, they enter through the walls of Jerusalem, and the parade ends abruptly. The crowd disperses, and Jesus goes away quietly. There is no storming of the temple. There are no fights to the death with the Roman soldiers, who you know were watching closely. Jesus does not enter the temple and offer a victory sacrifice. He simply looks around, and then leaves to go back to Bethany.

I said that if you join a parade, you need to know what you stand for, and you need to be involved in the cause after the parade ends. But I want to tell you, I think that Palm Sunday had a lot of fair weather fans and passive bystanders. When Jesus entered the city, they left him. And just a few days later, some of them were shouting, "Crucify him!" while others were running away.

What would you have done? Would you have joined the revelers? Or would you have mocked them from the sidelines? Would you have understood what Jesus was doing? Would you have been prepared to challenge the powerful leaders of the day, following this rabbi who comes riding on a donkey, who identifies with the poor and oppressed?

There are many times when we get caught up in the excitement of an event, even a worship service. We start to think about what fun it is, how good the music was, whether or not I liked the preaching. In other words, we get too caught up in our own immediate gratification. And when the buzz goes away, we move on to the next great fad. And when we do that, we miss the point of Jesus of following Jesus.

Fortunately for us, Jesus knew who he was. He never wavered from his mission. Jesus came to save the world by dying for us. His death on the cross conquered sin and brought eternal life to those who trust in him alone. That is a strange, crazy mission, and it is Jesus'. This is the king we follow, who turns the world upside down, and turns our lives upside down.

Some people claim that the church should never be political. If by political, you mean "partisan," then I agree. However, if by political, you mean, "involved

in the actions that shape our society and our world,” then I have to disagree. From the beginning, the church was a political movement, because it involved the people of God. The question left for us is, do we join this movement, or not?

Jesus does not ask us to join a parade for a few moments or a few days. Jesus wants us in for the long run. Parades come and go. Jesus invites us on a journey, a marathon.

What about you? Do you fully accept the consequences of following Jesus? Will you stand up in the face of injustice? Will you identify with and serve the poor, the outcast, and the rejected? Or will you just go along with the crowd? The true impact of our decision will not be measured by the number of palms in our hands or the volume of our praises. Our impact will be measured by the number of people we welcome whose lives differ radically from our own.

We are called to follow Jesus. We are commanded to deny ourselves, carry our cross, and go where he leads. If we want to be serious about Easter, we will not only wave our branches and join the crowds, we will also get our hands dirty and speak up for those who have no voice. This is what it means to follow Christ.

Memory Verse: Matthew 16:24

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Reflection Questions:

1. What was the last parade you participated in? What did it stand for?
2. When have you protested injustice?
3. Why do you think Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey instead of coming in a more powerful fashion? What does this say about the type of Savior he is?
4. What can you do to align yourself with the cause of the cross? How can the church identify with the poor and oppressed as Christ did?
5. What personal preferences are you willing to sacrifice to follow Jesus more fully?