

THE JESUS PARADE

Mark 11:1-11

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How is it that we are here today, 2000 years later and 6000 miles from Jerusalem, remembering something that took place then and there? What possible connection does that first Palm Sunday parade have with our lives?

The connection has everything to do, of course, with the main character in the story. Jesus' leadership was both timely and timeless. He was very much rooted in his time and place. His passion for justice was not generic; he was deeply aware of the political situation in his locale. The people from his home region of Galilee were poor and oppressed and he tried to do something about it. He confronted Rome, whose regime was completely unconcerned with anything except holding onto power and wealth. He was outraged by the systematic poverty directly caused by the greed and corruption of the Roman Empire, a poverty that resulted not only in people being hungry, which is bad enough - but in people living without dignity and without hope - which, for Jesus, was unacceptable. He quite willingly made himself an enemy of the political insiders, but it also incensed him that the religious establishment could be part of the problem as well, part of the problem instead of part of the solution. It is in the last week of Jesus' earthly life that he enters the temple in Jerusalem in a fit of anger, overturning the tables of the money-changers. They were selling animals for sacrifice, which was a normal and accepted part of worship in that time. The problem was that the people selling the animals

were taking advantage of the poor worshipers. The religious establishment was exploiting the poor; they were no better than the political establishment. Both systems had become immoral and Jesus wouldn't stand for it.

At the same time, Jesus is dismayed by the way the poor and disadvantaged are treated in everyday life, by ordinary people. Throughout his ministry, he demonstrates that he believes that all people are to be treated with dignity and respect. He rebukes his disciples when they try to keep children away from him. "Let the children come to me," he says, showing with his actions and saying clearly with his words that he values children, even though they were legally considered property at that time. He sees the woman at the well, the woman who has been married numerous times and so is ostracized by all of the people in her community. But Jesus notices her, and interacts with her, breaking all kinds of taboos, and she becomes an evangelist, someone who spreads the good news about Jesus. Jesus touches lepers, he befriends tax collectors, he eats with Pharisees. He lives a life of extravagant welcome.

Read through the gospels and you will see examples of Jesus' extraordinary relationships with all people. A Jewish man of his time was supposed to follow Jewish laws to the letter. He was not supposed to associate with women or non-Jews. If he was the Messiah, surely he would want to buddy up to the religious and political authorities, hang with the in crowd, be a part of the power players. But Jesus treated everyone equally. He chose as his twelve disciples a motley crew, imperfect and very human. He didn't label people, he didn't take sides. Rather, he was always on the side of those who were in need of an advocate. He touched the unclean, he hung out with those who

had questionable reputations. He called out policies of injustice wherever he saw them, without personally attacking those with whom he disagreed.

If you live this way, it turns out, you attract a lot of followers and a lot of enemies. This is the scene on that first Palm Sunday. It is the beginning of Passover week in Jerusalem, the most sacred week of the Jewish year. The population of Jerusalem would swell for Passover, with people coming from the entire region to be in this holy place for the holidays. Just as in our day, when a crowd is expected in a city, the officials are on the alert. This was a time of tremendous political upheaval. People were revolting and resisting Roman oppression. So, every year during Passover, the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate would ride into Jerusalem on his war horse. He would enter one of the gates of the city from the west, accompanied by big strong horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, and golden eagles mounted on poles. From all over that side of the city, people would hear the marching of feet, the cracking of leather, the clinking of bridles, and the beating of drums. Rome made its presence known, reminding people just who and what had control over their lives.

Jesus chooses his own kind of parade. He enters the city through one of the gates to the east. He comes down from the Mount of Olives, wearing an ordinary robe, riding a young donkey. Why a donkey? Almost everyone in Jerusalem that day would have thought of a passage of Hebrew scripture, from the prophet Zechariah, which says that when the king comes to Jerusalem, he will be humble, riding on a donkey. It's no coincidence that Jesus enters Jerusalem this way. He is sending a message to Pontius Pilate, who thinks of himself as a king. Jesus is saying, "There is another kind of power.

It is not political power, it is not military power. It is the power of God, the power of love, the power recognized by these ordinary people who are following me into the city today. I do not need to be accompanied by the drumbeat of war. I am accompanied by a cheering crowd of people who are ready for change, ready for a new kind of power to be unleashed into the world. They are tired of living in fear, tired of being oppressed. They want to be saved from your tyranny of fear.” And that indeed is what the people are saying. “Hosanna” which means “save us.” Save us from Rome. Save us from despair. Save us from being unable to imagine a different kind of future for our children. Save us into a new wholeness and freedom. Save us, Jesus.

I try to imagine what it would be like if Jesus were among us today in physical form. In our global era, with the 24 hour news cycle, there is so much more awareness of the pain of the whole world. Another of our Holy Week scriptures tell us that before Jesus entered the city gates, he looked down at the city from the Mount of Olives, and he wept over Jerusalem. What would Jesus weep over today? Would he weep at seeing the devastation of our rain forests, the melting of our ice caps, the pollution in our oceans? Would he weep when he saw Syria, so close to his homeland, or Yemen, where 8 million people are at risk of starvation? Yes, and also Jesus would weep at the injustices in this country, and the sad fact that our college students today describe themselves as growing up in the “school-shooting generation”. And also he would weep because we still have people who feel like outcasts.

But after Jesus weeps, he leaps into action. And that is what he calls us to do. If we are his followers, if we are a part of the Jesus parade, we are not allowed to wallow

in despair. We are allowed a few moments to weep and then we leap into action, just as he did. There is no time to look for someone to blame. Not when there are people to feed, houses to be built, laws to be written.

When we walk in the Jesus Parade, we walk in hope and courage. God has not given up on our world, and so we cannot either.

Jesus enters Jerusalem knowing that he is soon to die. He is willing to face that death because he knows, that it will end up becoming a victory for love, a greater message about the way life can be. Here's how one writer puts it, in what she calls "an obituary for Jesus": "It is an old, old story. Love comes into the world as a little child, fresh from God. When Love grows up, Love feeds people, Love heals people, Love turns things upside down. Love's actions do not set well with the people in charge. They warn Love to leave well enough alone. Love meets hate, meets politics, meets fear. Love goes on loving, which gets Love killed...".

Jesus is willing to die so that the spirit of love will live. That is how Jesus saves us. Jesus saves us from a life of fear, a life of despair. Jesus saves us from hopelessness and apathy by inviting us to walk in the Jesus parade. It won't always be popular, it won't always be easy. But it is a walk that saves us. There are others walking with us, so we are saved from loneliness. It is walking in the direction of love, so it is a walk with a purpose. It is a parade that bears witness to a life, a love, a dignity so great that neither death nor anything else will destroy it or silence it.

On Palm Sunday, we send our children up the center aisle waving their palms because of our faith and hope that God wants for them a better and more fair and more

peaceful world than the one in which Jesus rode into Jerusalem, the world that put him to death on a cross. We send our children up the aisle, because we will one day send them out into the world, and a life well-lived in this world demands faith and comes with risks. We do not know for sure what troubles they will face or what challenges they will need to overcome. We don't know what risks they will take in love or how they will be hurt along the way. We only know that, ages ago, the God who created them came into the world in person of Jesus as real protest against the violent world in which we live. So we continue to walk the Jesus parade, saying, with all those who walk with us, "Hosanna!" Save us now, because we truly do need to be saved.

Ride on, Lord Jesus. Ride on in majesty. And may we all, all our days, walk together the Jesus parade. Amen.

Inspiration and a few short quotes drawn from a couple of sermons preached at Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church.