



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
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WHOSE PARADE WILL YOU JOIN?

Palm Sunday

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Mark 11.1-11

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks 'Why are you doing this?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'"

They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" They answered as Jesus had told them to and the people let them go. When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David. Hosanna in the highest!"

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

There were two triumphal entries into Jerusalem on that Passover Sunday which was to be Jesus's last week on earth. The parade we're most familiar in that which is told in the gospels where Jesus rode into the city on a donkey as the people spread branches on his path to express their exuberant, if misguided, loyalty. The other triumphal entry is not as well-known but is crucial in understanding the oft-misunderstood importance of this one we read in Mark.

Jerusalem was a tinderbox during the week of Passover when the Jews celebrated divine deliverance from the oppression and slavery of past Egyptian Empires. Yet even as they celebrated that exodus from slavery year after year, they find themselves slaves to the Roman Empire in the 1st century. Each year's Passover celebration of their ancestor's deliverance sparked a reminder of their own oppression under Rome, threatening a holocaust of enormous proportions. And Rome knew the potential for a firestorm.

There had been two very large and lethal riots that had taken place at the Passover prior to Mark's account. Consequently, at the beginning of the week of succeeding Passovers, the Roman governor Pilate rode with the imperial cavalry to Jerusalem from Caesarea, the capital of the empire. Their

presence was a deterrent against riots by the Jews who, each year upon celebrating their past deliverance from captivity, protested against the present occupation by Rome. Pilate's triumphal entry from the west was the procession of Roman imperial power to quash any attempts to go up against that power as had been done in the past.

Jesus, in the story we are familiar with, entered the city from the east in counter procession, protesting the inhumane authority of Rome in demonstration of a new kind of reign in which God was to be the center. You get the picture: Pilate rides in from the west on his white steed in grand procession accompanied by his vast and powerful army with spears at the ready to do battle with anyone who steps out of line. Across town, Jesus rides in from the east on a donkey without spear or sword and accompanied only by a motley crew of starry-eyed people carrying branches they'd snapped off the trees *en route* in the belief that this guy was going to do battle with, and thus overpower, Rome. Their hopes were well-placed but for all the wrong reasons. They had put all their money on the right guy, but their bets were placed on a misunderstood expectation that he would win, when ultimately by Friday he would be dead.

The contrast is clear: Jesus verses Pilate. The nonviolence of the world as God would have it verses the violent, prejudiced, punitive, controlling power of the empire. There are two arrivals; two entrances from opposite directions; two processions and it's up to us to choose whose parade we will join.

That seems easy enough: we would certainly want to be with the Jesus crowd along with the Palm Sunday followers who wanted Jesus to be king, who wanted a kingdom where everyone was included, where all are treated fairly and with equity; where everyone is respected and all are honored with dignity. They loved this guy who told them stories of babies and children being included, who raised the dead and healed the sick and welcomed the outcast and those in the gutters. It seems an obvious choice between the pompous, arrogant Pilate and the loving, kind Jesus.

But hold your horses, or your donkeys, as the case may be. The problem in choosing sides wasn't just between right and wrong; following Jesus meant certain death. If we're going to march in the parade of the just and the righteous, we're going to have to die on Friday along with Jesus, making it not so much of a good Friday as we might think. Going up against political power is lethal. And if you think Jesus and a couple of thieves were the only three going up on crosses that week, think again; Rome crucified rebels by the thousands.

There are those who are more than willing to stand up and be counted as the grand marshals of the Jesus parade. They are proud to bear witness to their Christian commitment in following this Jesus who has saved them from their sin by condemning to hell those who don't follow their parade. They are more than happy to build their enormous floats that tout their Christian separatist principals against Muslims and Jews, to proudly and arrogantly march with a Jesus they believe hates the people in the other parade waving rainbow flags, and fly their banner in the face of liberals and those without NRA memberships. They're all for this Jesus they believe gave his life as a substitution for their own death and are eager to condemn to death those who don't keep in step with the music of their charade parade.

But have you noticed that the Jesus they follow is a Jesus who looks very much like the Pilate who rode into town on his powerful war horse with spears and an army to cut down anyone who opposes them? Have you noticed that when the Supreme Court of the land favors the rights of people

according to the Constitution, these followers of Jesus in Indiana and Texas and Arkansas create laws that put them above the law so they can discriminate and oppress in God's name? Whose Jesus are they following? It looks to me like their Jesus is no different than Caesar, with wicked rules that dictate who is privileged and oppress those underprivileged. Their Jesus seeks power through a political president to dictate hatred and prejudice in God's name in order to justify their own twisted view of righteousness.

It frightens me when people talk of the good ole USofA as an empire, some even calling us the new Roman Empire. Empires are about annihilating those weaker, those who are different, those we don't like. Empires are about power, and are built on fear, greed and anxiety that translate into bullying and war and oppression. It is easy to get defensive of our view of the Jesus in whose parade we are marching because we see the world increasingly dismissing God as irrelevant. When that happens, it's too easy to circle the wagons, to get scared, and to get mean.

It gives me pause when I hear of major political and religious leaders today calling themselves Dominionists because they actually believe that God has given them a divine mandate as Christians to assume positions of power and influence over all aspects of society and government, and that God has given them the right to exercise control over the natural world. And if you think I'm making this up, take a look at the long list of political and religious leaders today who identify with this mindset. They follow Jesus, perhaps, but a puppet Jesus who believes exactly as they believe and hates the same people they hate. And they have power and political savvy. We must be very careful whose parade we're in because the guy riding the white horse may not be the Jesus we expected him to be. It might be a Trojan horse you're following.

So, whose procession will we be in? It isn't as easy as it may seem. To stand with Jesus who stood with the outcasts, the marginalized, the ones society wants to banish and kill is to stand against political systems that can make life very uncomfortable. But we have to ask ourselves: will we find our security and our hope in a Jesus who rides side by side with Pilate on a war horse of prejudice and hatred? Or will we find our security in the vulnerable Jesus who rode the jackass into town proclaiming peace and respect, love and dignity, for the have-nots as well as the haves?

Mark's story ends with Jesus losing, with Jesus being put to death by imperial power but being raised by divine power. The authorities said "no" to Jesus by murdering him for his passion for justice, for equality, for the outcasts and peacemakers. But death was not the end, and God said "no" to the powers that killed him. There were two triumphal parades into Jerusalem that day who took opposing views of life and power. Whose parade will you join? Amen.

--Gary L. McCann