

Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion: April 2, 2023

Matthew 21:1-11

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Philippians 2:5-11

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I have vivid memories from Sunday School when we were told the story of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. A piece of felt shaped like Jesus, sitting atop a donkey with his legs draped over a colt, one arm raised in a royal wave. All around him were people – young and old – waving branches and laying their coats on the ground. The last pieces to be put on the felt board were the little children, who joined in the celebration, raising shouts of “Hosanna,” and ran alongside the procession waving their own branches in excitement and joy. This is a day that has, since my childhood, always signified celebration and happiness – Jesus finally got the welcome, praise, and glory he deserved after his very long journey into Jerusalem.

I admit that it can be difficult to let go of this childhood memory of Jesus' triumphant entry. Particularly now, as we near the end of our Lenten journey of self-examination and repentance and renewal, a day of celebration *feels* good. It feels kind of like the crowd is cheering us on, giving us that last boost of energy to finish this race. But then comes the last line of our reading for the Liturgy of the Palms: the whole city, Matthew tells us, was in turmoil because of Jesus. Who is this person at the center of this processional spectacle? What has he to do with us and why all the fanfare?

As a child, I'm not sure I really understood just how disruptive Jesus' presence was. That line about the city being in turmoil never really stuck. It was easy to get caught up in, and then remain in, that place of celebration, of happy parades and shouts of praise. But if we read just a little further on in Matthew's gospel, we find that Jesus' first act when entering the city is to go to the temple, to drive out the buyers and sellers, to overturn the money-changers' tables, to criticize the temple economic and power structure. “The whole city was in turmoil,” the writer says.

About fifteen years ago, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, released a book called, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem*. They propose that Jesus' wasn't the only “triumphant entry” into the city that day. From the West, another spectacle occurred. Soldiers' feet marched toward the city gates, imperial flags waved in the wind, and atop a beautiful warhorse sat Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Like nearly hundreds of thousands of other folks, Pilate made this entry into the city every year. Unlike nearly hundreds of thousands of other folks, Pilate was not making a pilgrimage to a holy city. Rather, he came as a reminder to the people of Jerusalem that Rome was still in charge. It was ironic because the occasion for this visit was the yearly festival of Passover, the commemoration of Israel's liberation from the oppressive Egyptian enslavement. Rome's presence was meant to quash any stirrings of resistance against Roman occupation.

Read against this background, Jesus' "triumphant entry" becomes a little less triumphant, more comedic and parody than victorious and joyful, more political theatre than happy parade. In other words, Jesus *performs* imperial authority in a way that mocks its perceived power and strength. Instead of riding in on a warhorse clad in armor and carrying banners of victory, Jesus sits on a donkey, a simple "beast of burden." But this joke also has a critical sting. As he mocks the powers and principalities of the Jerusalem and Roman elite, Jesus declares that the reign of God he has been preaching and teaching and manifesting, is and will be wholly other than the reign of Empire. Jesus is king, but his kingship will be wholly different than the forces of domination and power experienced under Roman control.

This, combined with his first stop at the temple after his so-called triumphant entry, suggests that what Jesus does is an act of revolutionary resistance – AND, provocation! We know where the story leads – the celebratory notes we hear in the cries of hosanna will fade away rather quickly as Jesus provokes not just the imperial command in Jerusalem but as he challenges the temple authorities and religious leaders. The humor of the joke dissipates as Jesus is arrested, tortured, and executed. It cost him everything.

And I wonder if this is what we're meant to reflect on as we enter into Holy Week. The story of Palm Sunday is an invitation to enter more fully into the story of Christ's passion, to take each methodical step through Jesus' last week as he teaches his disciples, as he impresses upon them what love really means, what the true marks of discipleship are. The story of Jesus' triumphant entry invites us to consider the cost of the protest we make when we wave our branches and palms and sing "All Glory, Laud, and Honor to our redeemer king!" It is a costly action to follow Jesus in the Way.

During this most holy week, we will be invited to sit in the confusion, desperation, and agony experienced by the disciples. We will be bid to acknowledge the shadows in which we hide, the evil in which we participate, and our own complicity in the crucifixion of Jesus. We cannot rush from the celebration and ceremony of the palms straight into the astonishing excitement of Easter. Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday cannot be bypassed, because the only way to Easter is through them.

And so we are bid to walk this path with Jesus as participants and not simply observers. We will experience the humbling act of being washed and of washing others; we will sit with Jesus keeping watch through the night; we will hear the mighty deeds of God who always works toward the liberation of God's people; we will sit with Jesus at the foot of the cross as he bears the loneliness and anguish of betrayal and condemnation.

My prayer for us this week, dear People of Grace, is that God gives us the grace and the perseverance to walk in the way of the Cross with our Lord so that we might also, by his resurrection, be brought into the newness of life that Jesus offers us.