

A Welcoming Parade

John 12.12-19

PALM SUNDAY

March 20, 2016

This morning we step onto the bridge of Holy Week that carries us to Easter. Culturally and socially, this is our initiation into Spring. Even if temps have already swelled into the mid-80s in recent days, the next week officially welcomes linen and seersucker and little girls in white shoes. As a child, this was one of my favorite days of the year with the palm branches waving and the music of worship returning to a more celebratory pace. As an adolescent, I recall feeling I surely would have been in the crowd yelling "Hosanna" for Jesus—surely would have been one who stayed loyal—surely would have been one who never denied him and always stayed true. As an adult, I feel the pull of Spring and planting a summer kitchen garden and know all too well how prone I am to wander away from the palms and the passion.

In these last breaths of the Lenten season, we run the risk of letting go of the biblical story out of excitement for the cultural one. Enough with the introspection and self-denial or practices that draw us to our best, God-created selves. I invite you to give yourself to this story for the week. Come back Thursday night for our Maundy Thursday service at 7:30. Attend a Good Friday service, whether it is Redeemer's in this space at 7:30 or another around town. Read one of the Gospels this week; lately we have been in John. Follow the progression of Holy Week and listen for the story that is our story. Let's hold on just a little while longer.

Last week we were in the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Lazarus, newly raised from the dead by Jesus. Martha, preparing a great feast for Jesus. Mary, overcome by the moment and quite certain it would be their last, pouring beautiful, expensive oil over Jesus feet. As Mary suspected, the word did spread that Jesus had raised a man from the dead. And indeed, that was quite enough to draw attention to Jesus and marked his final days. Quickly, word spreads about Lazarus, the plot to kill him commences because so many people were beginning to pay attention to Jesus and supporting his Way. And then...

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The next day the huge crowd that had arrived for the Feast heard that Jesus was entering Jerusalem. They broke off palm branches and went out to meet him. And they cheered:

Hosanna!
Blessed is he who comes in God's name!
Yes! The King of Israel!
Jesus got a young donkey and rode it, just as the Scripture has it:
No fear, Daughter Zion:
 See how your king comes,
 riding a donkey's colt.

The disciples didn't notice the fulfillment of many Scriptures at the time, but after Jesus was glorified, they remembered that what was written about him matched what was done to him.

The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb, raising him from the dead, was there giving eyewitness accounts. It was because they had spread the word of this latest God-sign that the crowd swelled to a welcoming parade. The Pharisees took one look and threw up their hands: "It's out of control. The world's in a stampede after him."

There's something about these scenes in John 12 that I find so compelling it becomes hard for me to disentangle my culture and time from theirs. I don't know the 1st-century mind. I don't know the political climate. And yet, there is something about the longing of the people who follow Jesus that seems so familiar to my own—to our own. Those who followed Jesus and were eager for his teaching weren't just drawn to him as a charismatic teacher, they were drawn to him as the path to a new way of being in the world. In the face of a religious tradition that was becoming exclusivist and elitist, he offered a table where all were welcome. When the social culture separated those who were acceptable from those who were not, Jesus gathered them all together and reconciled them to one another. And in today's text, we encounter a scene in which Jesus offers a different path than the political and dominant forces of Rome.

Last week's story with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus was deeply personal and intimate—the Jesus who knows us and loves us and calls us by name. We are happiest with these personal scenes, with the ways of loving and blessing, with the coziness of a meal and sacred space. And yet, there is more to the story just as there is more to following Jesus. Only a few verses after the oil is poured and Jesus tells them all that he won't be with them forever, we now encounter another side of Jesus—the Jesus who shows us we have to do something with that love he has shown us, we have to use that love for one another, we have to act out that love for the sake of the world. This is a love is deeply personal and ALSO an active love that enters the political realm.

“This is how [Marcus] Borg and [John Dominic] Crossan imagine it.¹

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... 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... 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's procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire... Pilate's military procession was a demonstration of both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology.”

There's something happening here in Jesus' actions. His choices are specific. The crowd's reaction is specific. This is not just about momentary praise for a popular rabbi. There is a theological and political statement wrapped in the symbols of this procession.

We Baptists get nervous when things start to sound too political at church, so let's unpack what politics means before I say what I'm about to say. About three months ago, Rob Bell dedicated an episode of his podcast to exploring “politics” as a good word. Bell dedicated a week of podcasts to the seemingly endless stream of mass shootings we experience in the United States. Knowing he would address topics that are difficult and divisive coupled with what was then the beginning of the presidential primary season and the complexity of a presidential election, Bell first spent time exploring what we mean and don't mean when we talk about politics.

He began with his premise: “Politics is a good word”² and then noted the Latin and Greek roots of the word: *polis* means *city*, *politicus* means *citizen*.

In talking about things political, we are talking about the citizens, how citizens live together, how we organize our shared life together because we're all in this together. We are acknowledging that there is a shared good between us that we all desire. Bell then went on to say “politics is necessary and vital to human thriving” because “politics is how we organize ourselves for our common good.”

It is essential that we talk about our common good, human thriving, shared good between us, how we live together. We talk about these things not because they are

¹ <https://onemansweb.org/theology/the-year-of-mark-2015/jesus-rain-on-my-parade-palm-sunday.html>

² <http://robbell.podbean.com/e/episode-54-politics-and-guns-part-1-politics-is-a-good-word/>

easy but because we love each other, and we love our neighbors. These conversations include clean water, safe neighborhoods, just policing, adequate food for all people, AND identifying and naming systems and structures that CONTRIBUTE to dirty water, unsafe neighborhoods, unjust policing, food insecurity.

Here's an example: When we start identifying that there are children three blocks from our church who go to school hungry and who do not have stable, secure housing, we respond with meeting some of those physical needs. You need food? We can give you a backpack filled with food. In fact, we can give you enough food for your whole family. Before long, we want to know more about the family's needs. And then we begin to ask how the family became homeless and had such needs. And then we begin to ask how is anyone in our city, in the 21st century, consistently and regularly going without enough to eat when we in this room have more than any of us needs to survive. We ask this whole series of questions because love demands it. That's when the theological becomes political. Not partisan but political.

I'm deeply Baptist in my affirmation of the separation of church and state, and I feel strongly that churches should not endorse candidates or political parties. At the same time, I believe we gather because we have something to say about how our shared life together is more about how to live *out there* than about the way we gather and behave *in here*. We practice in here, we talk and consider and experience in here, but the unique and distinct ways of following the path of Jesus and the love of God absolutely must be lived out. The ways we love one other and are loved by one other have ripple effects—we receive love and become more loving, our love for neighbor and stranger grows. And as our love for neighbor and stranger grows, we begin to work for their good because we know that everyone we encounter is a child of God, loved by God.

We're holding this story in sacred scripture of the expansive, gracious, celebratory love of God. It is personal and intimate. This story changes the way we understand ourselves and opens up opportunities for us to love each other. The Way of Jesus is deeply personal and fosters strong community because we begin to realize how we are connected to each other by the love of God.

We're also holding this notion that what we believe about God absolutely must inform how we live in the world. This is not just private, this is public. The things we believe about Jesus, when they are lived out, call us to organize ourselves in distinct ways for the common good.

We're also in the middle of a presidential election. And there is something happening in the race to the White House *out there* that is diametrically opposed to what we are professing in here.

We are in a season that none of us quite understands and what was initially easy to ignore and dismiss now feels to me like a runaway train of the very worst parts of us all. Outside of this worship hour, in the halls of this building, over Monday's red beans at lunch, on social media, we are conjecturing. We are wringing our hands. We are assuring one another that the spectacle of the presidential primaries will pass away.

Hold that things in your mind as we return to the 1st-century. In the gospel story this morning, there is a man riding into town with the power of Rome behind him. The kind of powerful man that David Brooks described in the New York Times just a couple of days ago as a, "scapegoating, promise-making, fear-driving and deceiving demagogue."³ Imagine this is the man riding in on one side of town with the crowds that gather to cheer for that certain kind of man. While this man rides in with great influence and power, Jesus grabs a donkey and starts his own procession. Yes, Jesus is riding toward certain death. And he is also showing everyone who is watching that the way of God is a different way than the way of Rome, than the way of demagoguery, than the way of ego driving power.

When the theological must become political, we are hearing a good word because we are talking about shalom—God's plan for the comprehensive thriving of all. We're talking about how we organize ourselves for the common good. We're considering how the faith we profess in here will and must shape the world we are making out there because we are called to be people who do not build huge walls but set elaborate banquet tables for all people.

Several years ago, Pastor Ricky Woods of the First Baptist Church-West in Charlotte, North Carolina, wrote a commentary on the challenge of Palm Sunday that invites us deeper into the story of this Jesus-led procession:

"What is often overlooked in this text is how palm branches serve as a symbol of resistance to foreign rule. In an article by John Hart entitled 'Judaea and Rome the Official Commentary,' he states, 'From time of the Maccabees, palms or palm branches had been a national symbol. Palm branches figured in the procession which celebrated the rededication of the temple in 164 BC and again when the winning of full political independence was celebrated under Simon in 141BC. Later, palms appeared as a

³ http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/18/opinion/no-not-trump-not-ever.html?_r=0

national symbol on the coins struck by the Judean insurgents during the first and second revolt against Rome.'

For Jesus to enter Jerusalem amidst shouts of affirmation and waving palm branches could be seen as an act of defiance against Roman rule. What removes the hint of defiance is that Jesus rides in on a donkey and not a warrior's horse. This shows that God's plan of deliverance would not come by fear and violence but would come through humility and love. It is hope, humility and love operating in an environment of danger that shows us what God can accomplish and how.

The church is sometimes called upon to engage in [bold, brave, and sometimes] dangerous activity, whether it is speaking out on issues of injustice or providing theological clarity about the church's purpose in a culture that craves entertainment.

Palm Sunday," writes Pastor Woods, "is more than another day of celebration by the Christian Church as it awaits Easter. It is also a day of reflection on how the presence of believers in dangerous places can transform them into places of hope. Palm Sunday is God's reminder to us of what can be done when courage, humility, love and hope coalesce and enter places of danger and what can happen when those filled with these character traits engage in [bold, brave, and sometimes] dangerous activity—this all leads to salvation."

What did they mean when they waved those branches? What hope did the crowd see in Jesus? What might Palm Sunday mean for us if those first branches were waved as a statement of where God was and was not and who God was and was not? What might it mean if the palms they waved signified belief in a world we cannot see yet commit ourselves to making right here on earth as it is in heaven? What if the leaves they waved in the air were brushing away the dark powers of this world that scapegoat, promise-make, fear-monger and deceive? What if the crowd wasn't confused at all about who Jesus was or what he was setting out to do? What if they were crystal clear in their minds and were lining up to give their lives to his way?

The kingdom of God is not found in the kingdoms of this world. The kingdom of God must be borne, created, welcomed, invited into being through our lives. The love of God can transform the world. These are the branches we have pinned to our chests this morning. These are the branches we have laid down beneath our worship. These are the branches that pave the way before us this week. Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!