

The Price of a Parade
Jubilee Mennonite Church
April 9, 2017: Palm Sunday

Purpose: To move from the journey toward Jerusalem to the events of Holy Week

Message: Jesus, who came to us as a servant, becomes our example for being justified in being the serving hands and feet of God, inaugurating a new way of serving, a new way of being the people of God.

Scripture: Matthew 21:1-11 [I will read; note no second reading this week]

Synopsis: There is a fine line between riot and parade. Really a matter of permits and propriety is all. Even as we join with the people welcoming Jesus to Jerusalem, we see the fine line that he is walking between savior and political actor. Many of those who are crying out “Save us Lord (Hosanna)” will be among those crying crucify him in a few days time. Jesus knows this. Yet he remains faithful to being God with us even here. Dare we follow after him?

Note: the movement here will be from triumphal entry to the darkness of Holy Week following, so will need to cover a long distance.

Matthew 21 1-11 New International Version (NIV)

21 As they approached Jerusalem
and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives,
Jesus sent two disciples,
2 saying to them, “

Go to the village ahead of you,
and at once you will find a donkey tied there,
with her colt by her.

Untie them and bring them to me.

3 If anyone says anything to you,
say that the Lord needs them,
and he will send them right away.”

4 This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

5 “Say to Daughter Zion,
‘See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”

6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them.

7 They brought the donkey and the colt
and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on.

8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road,
while others cut branches from the trees
and spread them on the road.

9 The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

10 When Jesus entered Jerusalem,
the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”

11 The crowds answered,

“This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Everyone loves a good parade. There is something downright Mom and Apple Pie about it—a community coming together to celebrate the occasions of pride and hope. It is a town's way to speak with one voice about what is important to them. I grew up in a small town which, in retrospect, could be a middle-american version of the fictional town of Mayberry. Sure it had its problems—firmly rooted in the post-industrial trials of the rust belt. But by in large it was a pretty good place to grow up: safe streets, places to get into the right sort of “children will be children” sorts of trouble without the world falling in too badly on anyone's heads. It even smells of strawberries when the wind is just right. The JM Smucker Jams and Jellies factory is headquartered on the North end of town. It is a good place, a homey place, a place that loves a good parade.

There's one traditional parade, though that walks the thin line between parade and protest. That is the annual grudge match football game between the Orrville Red Riders and the Wooster Generals. These are the two cities of the area with a long and storied rivalry between them. So the run up to this highlight of the football season was a big deal. This is Northeast Ohio where football is king, the be all to end all. It is routine for hospitals to put tiny footballs and pom poms into the basinetts to welcome new babies into the world. We are still waiting for the infant hockey set; or maybe tiny little curling stones. The whole week leading up to the game was basically written off as a lost cause academically as traditions and preparations were under way. Then would come Thursday night. There would be a giant pep rally and the marching band would lead the football players and cheerleaders riding in trucks through the town to the downtown square. Hanging there by a noose would be an effigy of the hated general, and after some short speech making about the hated other, this general figure would be cut down and paraded back to the school grounds in grand fashion where the figurative enemy would be the guest of honor for a number of more “go get'em boys” sort of cheers from the coaches and the general dummy was given some more insults before becoming fuel for the 30 foot bonfire the local fire department had erected for the occasion.

Most of this is harmless, small town tradition that does not mean a whole lot except it has been done this way for time immemorial. Rallies like this happen all over the place where there

is not really anything better to do. In retrospect the ritual burning and hanging of any human form is not all that tasteful, but be that as it may. But take away the propriety of tradition and school spirit, and what would you have? It would be a riot, brass band or no. A mob of students marches on the town, blocks a state highway to abuse a human form that is later burned in ritual fashion. I bet that would draw some attention and not in a good way. Think armed response. Everyone loves a parade. Nobody loves a protest.

This is true now. And it is equally true in Jesus' time. Today we celebrate the pay off of the long journey to Jerusalem: the triumphal entry of Jesus marching into the city of cities to inaugurate what was about to be. Palm Sunday serves to memorialize what can sometimes be seen as the people finally getting it and recognizing Christ for who he was and what he was offering. As the gospel writer takes great pains to remind us, all of this was happening to fulfill prophetic witness and the hope for a Messiah was very present. No doubt there were a few whose aspirations of a conquering hero ran high in these days, seeing the possibility of a coming messiah and the salvation from the boot of Rome at long last. The city was full for the Passover holiday, the feast of freedom and salvation, the moment was here, and they knew what they wanted. How we want to be part of the crowds praising the entering Christ and shouting Hosanna—a word which has been given a meaning of blessing to a coming hero, placing the proper identity and function to the arriving Christ. We want to be part of the adoring crowd, heralding the coming of a new king. Hosanna! Glory to God in the Highest!

Yet even as we shout Hosanna, we fail to grasp the full meaning of these words. For us this is a term of adoration and praise—the adoration of the one who we love rejoicing in the Lord. Yet there is a fuller message in a much more important meaning. As is so often the case, the Hebrew roots that are hybridized to make Hosanna actually carry the meaning of “Deliver us we beg” in the most literal translation. So just as much as this was a parade to hail the coming of a new leader, it was also one in which the expectations of the waiting crowd were also palpably present. The crowds are expecting something very particular—salvation from their immediate circumstances. As Jesus ride the lowly animal through the streets as a hero, he is being presented with cries for action, surrounded by the pleas of a hurting and expectant population. The crowds see an opportunity to be given what they want, to be the successful

persons and nation that they have been promised through a covenant with YHWH God. Jesus made it very clear what sort of salvation he was offering, and it was not the “power by any means” muscular spiritual and foreign policy that people understood. Instead it was the Kingdom of God, the way of love, and the means of peace which was being offered. With this sort of context to the riotous parade of the entry, is there little wonder why by the end of the week these same voices may well be crying “crucify”?

We, too, have a sense of longing in our cries of Hosanna, of Lord save us, to be heard. “Hosanna,” we cry, “Lord Save us, our environment is suffering.” “Life is not turning out the way I envisioned; Hosanna.” “Hosanna, we sometimes find it difficult to love our neighbors.” “Our country, our culture lives in pervasive fear; Hosanna, Lord save us.” “Hosanna, let there be peace on Earth.” Hosanna. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Indeed, these cries, and so many more, are constantly on our lips, holding our most innate hopes and fears to the one who hears all prayers. We cry out to a God who hears our prayers, who grieves with us, who works within and through us to bring about the redemption that is promised to the world through the model of Christ, the very model of a servant. How we long for the calls to God for salvation to be realized in the ways that we would prefer, in those ways which would realize the kingdom in exactly the ways in that we imagine the kingdom ought to be. We would much rather move from this day of parade to the day of resurrection, walking from the cries of Hosanna to those of Hallelujah without contemplating the cost which is brings about the hope of a new community and new reality—bearing even the unbearable for the sake of each one of us. Our calls of Hosanna are met with a call that Jesus gave so many times: if you would come after me, pick up the cross and follow. Dare we do such a thing, especially when we know often far too well what it might just cost us? Can we in our wildest hope step out in faith, trusting a resurrecting God will meet us in the world come what may?

It is exactly Jesus’ example of being a servant that changes the road to the temple from the pomp of a parade to the radical transformation of revolutionary action in the street. Jesus precedes to the temple, to the place of sacrifice, the place of conflict because his call as the servant of YHWH compelled him to keep going. Knowing what Jesus knew, we can but imagine the impulse that had to have been there to turn away, to dismount and to send the crowds away

telling them that they have the wrong person, or that is just not how this is going to go down. The way of Jesus, the way to the temple and the cataclysmic climax of his ministry is the way of service realized in the path of discipleship. Jesus knew the cost of the way that he traveled, and stayed on that road that we might know the true way of the kingdom of God, that hope arises from the most hopeless situations, that the way of true service and giving love are the way of the new kingdom, not the way of military might and political power. Jesus assessed the costs, and trusted that the costs would be borne out by a God who works through the hands of servants and the lowly, not the scepters of kings and princes. And it is this choice of faithful following that heals us all.

This march of the Palms is a march into the shadow of what is to come, but also a march toward the hopeful dawn around the corner. This is a celebration of the kingly coronation of a new way that holds no cost too high, no chasm too deep, and no reality so irredeemable as to be beyond the loving action of God to redeem this needy, wanting world, in need of salvation of every type. We walk the way of the Kingdom and God working through us, granting new life and new growth when we need it most. This is the revolution of the streets. This is the revolution of the triumphant entry of Christ into the way of radical servitude. May we each find our call, our part, and our home within the parade of God that changed the world, and rebuilds it still, whatever the cost might be, finding even when we least expect the grace to follow the parade of home..