
Is Jesus Reigning/Raining on Your Parade?

Matthew 21:1-11

The drama and spectacle of Palm Sunday make it, for me, one of the most anticipated Sundays in the Church Year. It may very well be one of the most physically demanding services too—parading around the church grounds, waving palm branches high in the air the whole time, singing songs a bit louder than usual, marching with instruments—by the time you get to this point in the service, you feel like you’ve really been working. You have certainly earned your lunch! What is extra-meaningful for me is how the children get involved on this particular day. Hardly is worship, for any of us, so kinesthetic and visual. I always look forward to it! And we have to not let the ritual and festivities cause us to miss some of the significance of Palm Sunday that *doesn’t* make it up on the nursery wall.

“Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!” is the chant that rings from the crowd. I’d be embarrassed as a minister of the gospel to tell you: for how long I believed the word “Hosanna” was just a fancy church word used in celebrations, sung in exuberant hymns, as a synonym for praise. *Hosanna* carried a double meaning—not a shout of praise but of cry of deep prayer. It meant, at once, “Lord, save us” and also “Thank you for saving us.” That changes the tenor of the parade, doesn’t it? Many of us understand this well. Many, just yesterday, filled streets, as did our family, in No kings marches. There is a euphoria to know you are not alone in the fight for justice for all, for democracy. And it will take all our voices. “Show me what community looks like. This is what community looks like!” And in the comfort of solidarity, there is still a deep cry, “Lord, save us!” I could preach on that this morning, but that’s not what the sermon is about.

We could also spend our time—as we often do—considering the fickle nature of the crowd—who in one moment is raising their collective voices, forming a red carpet of sorts with their cloaks, and waving palm branches to welcome Jesus, the Divine Warrior, AND in the next moment turning to join the angry mob chanting, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” One commentator said that “Palm Sunday, at its best is a day of triumph; at its worst, it is a day of tragic irony.”

It would be worth considering our own fickleness and what it means to be a follower of The Way, even when things turn ugly, even when our social status is threatened. “We cannot worship Christ on Sunday and make peace with hate on Monday.” But that’s not the sermon for today either.

We should also consider that many that day *didn’t* leave the parade, but stayed until the party was well over—the default clean-up crew, if you will. You know this type—church folk who are present whenever the church doors are open. Faithful believers, for sure. Die-hards for their religion and denomination to the very end. Both Katie and I grew up in the church and we have always been the kind that stays until the very end, “the ones who turn out the lights.” “Inertia may be one of the most powerful forces in the social world,” says one religious analyst and author of the book, *The Vanishing Church*. Inertia being that resistance to change for what is in a current state of motion. The numbers detailing religious involvement since 1972 confirm that regardless of the decline in church attendance over the years, changing ones beliefs has largely never been a thing for Christians. And yet, in words attributed to Thomas Merton: “If the ‘you’ of five years ago doesn't consider the ‘you’ of today a heretic, you are not growing spiritually.” So, are we growing spiritually?

Are you following the Christ or the trappings of what has been setup in that name? Jesus is risky and unpredictable. When we expect a war horse, he enters through the gates on a donkey. When we want him to stay and party with us, he’s already well on his way to the temple to confront our religiosity. Palm Sunday is rich with opportunity to ask again: If we remain at the parade, what will we miss? In our inertia, we may miss the Jesus that turns over temple tables in righteous anger because they were selling the “required” offerings that exploited the poor. We may miss the Jesus who confronts political power in Pilate’s court, over “what is truth?”. “My kingdom is not from this world . . . If it were, my followers would be fighting,” Jesus says. Which is often misunderstood as “my kingdom is not *in* this world.” That’s what Pilate heard. But the Greek

helps us know that “*from this world*” means not sourced in the same systems of power. The parade-or-die types may miss being with Jesus as he suffers at the hands of injustice . . . in the end, some may miss the Jesus of the cross. Reflecting on how inert faith can calcify into toxic religiosity is worth our reflection on this day, but not necessarily the main point of this sermon. This morning, I want to talk about a choice we all have to make.

Christian scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan remind us that “Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30 . . . One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mouth of Olives, cheered by his followers . . . On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate . . . entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial calvary and soldiers.”

Like two boxers entering from opposite corners of an arena, destined to meet in the middle, Jesus and Pilate enter through their respective gates making a B-line toward one another, both with disruption on the mind. One scholar calls Jesus’ parade “a deliberate parody—a political demonstration.” Meaning, Jesus and the crowd were creating a caricature of the annual imperial march into the city around Passover. They would do this to make themselves highly visible, to keep the order, to create an aura of peace, but a false one that comes through the threat of violence. “Jesus’s procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate’s proclaimed the power of empire.”

Many have said that Jesus was setting up an alternative way of peace. While some have lately questioned whether we should continue to view Jesus’ kin-dom as an *alternative* to empire, and not the other way around. One of my favorite signs from the march, I posted about on social media yesterday, was the one that said: “When cruelty becomes normal, compassion looks radical.”

In Luke’s version of the palm parade, the Pharisees order Jesus to stop the parade. Jesus responds: “. . . if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” And when Jesus gives up his final breath on the cross, it says: “At that moment . . . the earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open.” The reign of God is woven into the very fabric of creation. The cosmos itself bares witness to the glory of the Divine. “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord. The whole earth is full of your glory,” the prophet Isaiah sings. The Psalmist proclaims: “The heavens declare the glory of God.” Paul writes to the church in Rome: “Ever since the creation of the world God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible

though they are, have been seen and understood through the things God has made.”

There is something elemental, fundamental, even cosmic to the reign of Christ. And yet, it still comes to us as a choice. Fear and the tenuous promise of safety and prosperity in the economy of this world, tempt us to live by another way. When we align with empire, we have to know that *that* is the unnatural way, in the truest sense of the word. Compassion, justice, equality—this is not an *alternate way*, but the life-force that wants to burst from harden rocks, if we aren’t going to work to give it voice first.

Now, standing here with you all—many who have anti-Trump poster board signs folded up in your living rooms—it would seem that I’m preaching to the choir this morning. We have to remind ourselves that *remaining* in the Christ-parade is literally a labor of love. It takes work. Daily work. Inertia threatens to set in and cause a regression to the even the subtle ways of empire.

We may not join the imperial march, but empire is satisfied . . . When we avoid solidarity that costs us something. We may feel compassion but it must be from a safe distance. We might pray, post about, or express concern, but hesitate to move close enough that it costs us something relationally, socially, or materially.

Empire is satisfied . . . When we spiritualize what is meant to be concrete. We think of resurrection as a metaphor and merely spiritualize the need for healing of neighbor and creation. We turn justice into “being nice.” We make discipleship a matter of private belief. Empire loves this because it leaves the systems we feel each and every day untouched.

When we equate comfort with blessing. Our own comfort can mean we are well-insulated from the very places Jesus is moving. This is to soften the edges of the gospel, so we don’t come across as too unreasonable, unbalanced, or “too much”.

When we outsource responsibility. We assume “someone else” will do the hard work. Even in our own church, responsibility is left for the more active ones. Or in the community, left for the leaders and activists.

When we cling to what God is trying to disrupt. We pray for the new but resist letting go of control, resist releasing old identities, resist dismantling old assumptions.

Empire is satisfied . . . When we mistake religious activity for participation in God's kingdom. When we assume that going to church is the same as being church . . . or that it's all about using the right language or doing "good things", yet without a transformation of the heart and mind.

In our reading this morning from the book of Philippians—a hymn sung by the early church—it says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus . . . "

If I can make a quick pitch. If you're one who has been mostly watching from the sidelines here at PCL and you're wanting to know how to engage more in a costly way, to move out of your comfort zone even, we are having a New Membership class in April. This will be a 2-week class that takes place during the Sunday School hour on April 19 & 26. So, if you're not a member yet, even though you have been an important part of this community, come and learn more about what membership looks like here in this congregation.

There is a meaningful tradition which began around the 9th century of collecting the beautiful green palms of today's parade, letting them dry out, and stowing them away until next year's Ash Wednesday when they are burned and ground down into a fine powder, which is then used to etch crosses on the foreheads of worshipers at the beginning of next year's Lent.

Now, we may not practice that tradition here at PCL, but I like the message that it conveys. That our parade should always be contextualized by the road that leads to the cross, not on the road to power and victory through through violence. This choice is before us in a new and pressing way today.

"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference." May it be so for us. Amen.