

***Which "Parade" Are We In?
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Toronto United Mennonite Church
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Scripture: **Matthew 21:1-17; Isaiah 50:4-9a**

Hymn: We are servants of God's peace (HWB 407)

Toronto is a city of multiple parades. Where our family lives, in the student housing at Yonge and Bloor, parades of one kind or another seem to pass by quite often, all throughout the year. There's the Pride parade, and the St. Patrick's Day parade, the International Women's Day parade, and the Santa Claus Parade, to name just a few. Elsewhere in the city, there's the Caribana Parade and, more pertinent to our current church season, the upcoming Good Friday Procession in Little Italy. There seems to be no shortage of opportunities to gather en masse on the sidewalks to watch people march and floats drive by, in public celebration and support of a cultural festival or cause.

Our main scripture passage for today is about an event that resembles a parade: Palm Sunday, the day when Jesus processed into the city of Jerusalem, riding on a donkey whose hooves didn't even touch the ground, which was strewn with cloaks and palm branches. It's a familiar story, one which we re-read every year in the lead-up to one of the holiest Sundays in our faith tradition. It's also a story which appears in all four Gospels (see Mark 11, Luke 19, John 12). The four accounts of the story share the major events: Jesus rides a donkey or a colt, which he either finds himself or gets his disciples to find, people gather at the roadside to watch him ride into the city, shouting

"Hosanna!" or "Save us!" and carpeting his path with cloaks and branches, as a kind of ancient version of a "red carpet." Matthew's telling of the story is different in that he is careful to point out its fulfillment of Scripture, as is fitting for what's known as the most "Jewish" of the Gospels. He has Jesus ride a donkey *and* a colt, so that his entry into Jerusalem is a full and literal fulfillment of the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9: "Tell the daughter of Zion," Matthew quotes, "Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." We know this story, we've heard it many times, and we re-enact it yearly with the children in our community. But perhaps in reading it primarily as a story for children, we've taken some of the political edge off of it.

Let me explain. One of the commentaries I read in preparation for this sermon was the book *The Last Week* by biblical scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in which the two authors go through the events of the last week of Jesus' life day by day. As they point out, we tend to think of this story as one primarily about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, about his "parade" of Palm branches and Hosannas. But Matthew's audience would have known that there was another, much more well-known entry into the city, which for us is now hidden between the lines: this was the entry of the Roman governor (none other than Pontius Pilate) into the city of Jerusalem for Passover, an event which was repeated at every major Jewish festival. So Jesus' wasn't the only "parade" going on in the streets of Jerusalem that day! As Borg and Crossan write, "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 from 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.”¹

These two processions could hardly have been more contrasting, not only in their message, but even in their effect on those observing from the sidelines. Borg and Crossan flesh out the look and feel of Pilate’s procession; they write: “Imagine the imperial procession’s arrival in the city. A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful.”² Then there was Jesus’ procession: I imagine the earth tones of the woven cloaks and the deep green of the palm branches covering the dust of the road, the crunch of the leaves under the hooves of the plodding donkey, the shouts of the people who react with enthusiasm and joy, including the children. Riding on a donkey, Jesus must have been only a bit higher than eye-level for those who gathered to watch. Unlike the solemn march of the troops, this procession wasn’t meant to intimidate or evoke fear in the people who gathered, but to evoke a sense of celebration at this encounter with Jesus – really, it was much closer to a parade than Pilate’s procession.

¹ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: The Day-by-Day Account of Jesus’ Final Week in Jerusalem* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 2.

² Borg and Crossan, 3.

But that doesn’t mean that it was frivolous. Borg and Crossan call it “a prearranged ‘counterprocession’” or “a planned political demonstration.”³ You can’t just schedule your parade for the same day as a Roman imperial show of might, and not garner attention from the powers that be – especially considering that large public gatherings were forbidden under Roman rule.⁴ As a kind of parody of the Roman military exercise, Jesus’ parade must have been taken as a major political gesture on his part, and an overt challenge to Rome; as Matthew writes in verse 10, “the whole city was in turmoil,” and people were wondering, presumably, who this gutsy, parading political protester – or, to use biblical language, who this *prophet* – was. But Jesus’ political parade didn’t just challenge Rome; as Matthew’s version highlights, it led straight into the Temple, which at the time was at the heart of the collaboration of the Jewish elites with the Roman occupation.

Jesus’ “Cleansing of the Temple” is likewise a familiar story for us, and we often boil it down to the idea that the business people who had set up their tables in the Temple, the money changers and the ‘dove-sellers,’ weren’t being respectful enough of the Temple as a place of worship, that they had made it into a market-place rather than a sanctuary.⁵ While this is true, I think it’s only part of what’s going on here; again, it dulls the political edge of the story. Turning back to Borg and Crossan, they explain that during the Roman occupation, against the Israelite stipulations in the law, the high priest, scribes, and elders who ran the Temple were appointed by the Romans and came from the wealthy elites or landowners. As such, they were in charge of collecting

³ Borg and Crossan, 3-4.

⁴ Borg and Crossan, 13.

⁵ Rosemary M. Dowsett, “Matthew,” in *The InterVarsity Press Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 536.

the "tribute" or taxes which were "owed" to Rome from the transactions and sacrifices in the Temple, and kept records of everyone's debt in the Temple. Borg and Crossan state that the situation "had the defining features of ancient domination systems: *rule by a few, economic exploitation, and religious legitimation*. And it was a two-layered domination system: the local domination system centered in the temple was subsumed under the imperial domination system that was Roman rule."⁶ This is arguably what Jesus' cleansing of the Temple is all about. While many Jews travelled to the Temple in Jerusalem for major Jewish festivals like the Passover, including peasants like Jesus and his followers, they were there presumably going there to be in God's presence, as the Temple was understood as the dwelling place of God.⁷ Instead, Jesus saw the elite collaborators taking advantage of them – taking from the poor – for their own profit and that of the Roman occupiers, all while claiming that they are thereby serving God. So he drives out those people, those responsible for making the Temple into a "den of robbers," in order to restore its sacredness as a "house of prayer," a place where God is *encountered*. And the children who are there in the Temple shout, "Hosanna!" – even the nursing babies know what Jesus is up to – but others, including the chief priests and scribes, don't seem to understand what he's doing (vv.13, 15-16).

So what about the crowds, then, who gathered to watch Jesus parade into the city? How many of them truly understood what kind of encounter they were having? What compelled them to watch Jesus' "parade" instead of the other one? As they shouted, "Hosanna," did they understand what kind of salvation they were asking for, or

⁶ Borg and Crossan, 15-18.

⁷ Borg and Crossan, 6.

what kind of a king Jesus was? In some ways, Jesus is pretty clear that he is not a king like other kings, that he is a peaceful and humble king. After all, unlike in the parade at the other end of the city, he's not riding a war-horse, but a donkey; in today's terms, the difference is analogous to someone coming into the city in a tank, an obvious symbol of war, and someone else coming into the city on a harmless bicycle! Jesus is sending a message here, one echoed by the reference to Zechariah, where the coming king is associated with the end of war. Just after the verse that Matthew quotes from Zechariah, we read, "He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations" (Zech. 9:10a). Interestingly, Matthew seems to stress this point, as he omits a line from Zechariah when he quotes the verse: he leaves out that the coming king is "triumphant and victorious," which makes Jesus' humility all the more important. But would those who gathered to watch Jesus have caught this message? Maybe some of them thought that Jesus was *emulating* the parade on the other side of the city rather than *subverting* it through parody; maybe they thought that as soon as he took power, he would find a "tank" to ride into the city, too, that the "bicycle" was simply a provisional mode of transportation rather than a central and intentional symbol of Jesus' message of peace.

But before we start thinking that we've got everything figured out, I'd venture to say that we've done our fair share of misunderstanding Jesus. I've already mentioned one example here, which is our tendency to de-politicize Jesus' message and actions –

that is, to separate what he was doing on Palm Sunday from the events of Good Friday and Easter. Perhaps our passage from Isaiah can help illustrate what I mean.

Isaiah 50:4-9 is one of the songs about the Suffering Servant who appears at four places in the book of Isaiah. This isn't the most famous of the four "Servant Songs"; we're probably most familiar with the one that comes a few chapters after this one (Isaiah 52 and 53). There, we read that the Servant "was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities," "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter," and that "by his bruises we are healed" (53:5, 7). But in our passage for today, we hear words from the Servant's own mouth. And though some of what he has to say resembles the later Servant Song – particularly the gruesome details in verse 6: "I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting" – most of the passage takes on a different tone. The Servant speaks about God teaching him God's ways in an intimate way: we read, "Morning by morning [God] wakens – wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught" (Isa. 50:4b). And this intimate knowledge of God turns to a profound strength of faith in the face of adversity; the Servant expresses deep *confidence* in his own innocence and in God's impending help, despite his abusive treatment by others. He says, "The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; [God] who vindicates me is near. . . . It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?" (50:7-8a, 9a).

Confidence. It's not the first thing we associate with the Suffering Servant, the figure who epitomizes meekness in going willingly to his death, but here in Isaiah we glimpse this neglected side of the Servant. Here he is confident, even to the point of

challenging others to question his innocence and his closeness to God’s ways. And if we follow the Christian tradition of associating the Suffering Servant in Isaiah with Jesus – who, as we will see this week, on Good Friday, was also struck, spat upon, and unjustly accused – then Jesus’ actions on Palm Sunday become even more poignant as they take on this added dimension. The *IVP Women’s Bible Commentary* states that Jesus as the Suffering Servant is “an unlikely messianic figure . . . because this servant suffers rather than demonstrates his power as an all-conquering king,” but also that he is an unlikely male leader, undermining the gender expectations of his context: as a man who has garnered something of a following in a patriarchal society, he “oppose[s] the seduction of gendered power” and instead adopts “a pattern of serving, renouncing, suffering, and dying,” a pattern which has historically been that of women and other people of “lesser” sociopolitical status.⁸

So what exactly does this mean with regard to Jesus’ power? What this particular Servant Song highlights within the events of Palm Sunday is that Jesus avoids twin pitfalls when it comes to power. On the one hand, he avoids the temptation to use violence and dominance, to imitate what the imperial parade on the other side of the city is all about. In this, as already mentioned, Palm Sunday’s peaceful parade is a key demonstration of Jesus’ subversion of the expectations of what kingship entails. Though he could have chosen a different way, though he could easily have rallied his followers to violence against Rome (as some of them were expecting him to do), Jesus chose instead to confront Rome and its collaborators nonviolently, even though it ultimately led to his death at the end of the week. **But** what we often forget is that this doesn’t mean

⁸ Julie Ann Hilton, “Isaiah,” in *The InterVarsity Press Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 361.

that Jesus surrendered all power, that Jesus was power/less. This is the other pitfall which Jesus avoids: that of masochism or suffering for its own sake. As this Servant Song and Jesus' prophetic and provocative parade exemplify, the events of Palm Sunday are also a demonstration of Jesus' confidence in his path – his trust that God is with him, that he is with God, and that he is God-with-us, Immanuel. Through parading through the streets and straight into the Temple, Jesus, like the Servant, courageously challenges those who oppose him – both the Roman occupiers and the collaborators in the Temple system. Thus we see that *peace doesn't translate into powerlessness*, even though it's a path fraught with risk. Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem therefore wasn't simply a death-wish; he wasn't masochistically coming into the city just to be executed, though that was part of what brought him there. No, he was coming into the city to confront the wrongs being perpetrated against God and against God's people, out of *love* for God and God's people. It was a different kind of power which prompted Jesus to act in such a public, courageous, and confrontational way that first Palm Sunday. So, as Borg and Crossan remind us, "Holy Week is the story of this confrontation"⁹ between the two opposing parades at either end of Jerusalem, one exemplifying the way of the kingdom of God, the other exemplifying the way of Empire.

So where does this leave us, thousands of years after these two parades occurred in a faraway city? It's striking to think that even though there were these two parades in Jesus' day, it's the kingdom parade which has been remembered, while the imperial one has faded into the background. But though it might not be as obvious a division as two different parades, there are still ways in which we directly serve or

⁹ Borg and Crossan, 5.

collaborate with Empire these days; there are ways in which we use the power of violence – in participating in the injustices of our capitalist economic system, in abusing the privilege of our gender or sexual orientation or skin colour or socio-economic class, in orienting our lives around the march of so-called "progress" despite its destruction of God's good Creation. Maybe we're not marching in the imperial parade itself, maybe we're just stuck watching it from the sidelines. Either way, Jesus invites us to get ourselves across the city to an entirely different kind of parade: a parade based on the power of peace, justice, and love, a parade guided by following God's way. That's where we'll encounter the man riding on a donkey, not a war-horse, a simple bicycle, not a tank, and it's to *him* that we can feel confident shouting, "Hosanna; save us!" Amen.