

**“WHICH PARADE?”**  
***Psalm 118:19-29; Mark 11:1-10***  
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In the days when the Richfield Coliseum was in operation, the circus performed there every year. My boys were young at the time. I remember my wife taking them to Peninsula, where the circus came to town by railroad. As the elephants were unloaded from the boxcars, they would be led up the road to the Coliseum where they would eventually perform. The sight of a dozen or so elephants walking along Route 303 with the trunk of one holding the tail of the one in front of him was quite a spectacle! Just to see these huge animals was exciting, but the unloading of these elephants also signaled what was to come. That parade up the hill did what all circus parades are designed to do: heighten our anticipation of what is to follow.

This morning’s Lectionary reading is the story of a parade. It describes some of the preparation and the excitement as Jesus prepares to enter Jerusalem. We can almost feel the anticipation, for a drama, unequalled in the history of humankind, is about to unfold. You may not realize that there were actually two parades entering Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday long ago. That’s right, two processions entered the Holy City on that spring day in 30 A.D. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year. In their book, *The Last Week*, which has won the acclaim of both liberal and conservative scholars alike, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan explain that on that first Palm Sunday, two parades entered Jerusalem: one from the east and one from the west.(1)

In those days, the Roman governor lived in a beautiful palace on the Mediterranean coast. But when the Jewish festival of Passover approached, the governor always took up residence in Jerusalem. After all, twice in years past there had been riots that had gotten out of hand. The presence of the Roman governor served to remind the Jews that while Passover commemorated their deliverance from the domination of the Egyptians under the leadership of Moses centuries before, they were very much under the domination of Rome at the present time.

To reinforce his position of power, Pilate entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of cavalry and soldiers. Imagine the imperial procession’s arrival in the city: a visual panoply of imperial authority — cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, the sun glistening on metal and gold. The sound of power would have been almost deafening: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clanking of bridles, the beating of drums.

Pilate’s procession displayed not only imperial power, but Roman imperial theology. According to this theology, the emperor was not simply the ruler of the Roman empire, he was the son of God. It began with Augustus, the greatest of the Roman emperors. Roman religion taught that the god Apollo was the father of Augustus, who conceived him with his mother, Atia.

Inscriptions refer to Augustus as the “Son of God,” “Lord,” and “Savior,” the one who had brought “peace on earth.” His successors continued to bear divine titles, including Tiberius, who was the emperor at the time of Jesus.

On the opposite side of the city, in contrast to Pilate’s imperial procession that entered Jerusalem that Sunday morning from the west, another parade entered Jerusalem from the east. Another king was coming to town. But this king was riding on a donkey. To be sure, there were those who wanted to follow a military leader and preferred that Jesus had chosen a war horse. In New Testament times a ruler rode into a city on the back of a horse to signal that he was ready for war. But Jesus deliberately chose a donkey, a symbol of peace, because he was announcing a new reign of peace that was arriving in a new way.

In stark contrast to Pilate, whose claim to peace was the result of military hardware and a host of soldiers, Jesus promises to banish war from the land — no more chariots, no more war-horses, no more bows and arrows. He will be a king of peace. He is the king foretold in the book of the prophet Zechariah: “*He will cut off the chariots 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. 9:10) Jesus’ procession deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city. Pilate’s procession embodied the power, glory and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus’ procession embodies an alternative vision: the kingdom of God.

The Palm Sunday procession, while joyful and hopeful, was no leisurely ride for Jesus and his followers. For Jesus is making a deliberate statement about who he is. His bold actions will inevitably lead to conflict. This ride of the back of a peaceful donkey, is a ride like no other. One of the commentators refers to the “roller coaster of emotions” that this ride, this parade anticipates.(2)

The confrontation between the kingdom of Rome, symbolized by Pilate’s army, and the kingdom of God, symbolized by Jesus’ followers, mostly from the peasant class, will continue throughout this coming week. As we all know, the story ends with Jesus’ execution by the powers that ruled the world of his time. Holy Week is the story of that confrontation.

I believe that this confrontation between the kingdom of Caesar and the kingdom of God took place not only in Jerusalem in 30 A.D., but has continued down through the centuries, continues in our day, and in our lives. The first disciples were not the only ones who had to choose between the power of Caesar and the power of God. The challenge to choose comes to every human life. I am convinced that every week is Holy Week. Every week you and I are challenged to decide, to take a stand, to choose which parade we will follow and with which empire we will align ourselves. In the process, conflict is inevitable: conflict with the world, conflict with other people, conflict within our own hearts. Anyone who has ever tried to take the faith seriously and live responsibly knows that sometimes there is a struggle at work. We struggle with family members, with neighbors and friends. When the chips are down, more intense than any other struggle though, is the struggle that takes place within our own minds and hearts and souls.

Yes, following Jesus means following a different path than following the ways of the world. Following Jesus means that we commit ourselves to different values from most of the rest of the world. Some of these values are dramatically different. Take **forgiveness**, for example, the value one sociologist of religion says is the defining hallmark of the Christian faith as compared with other religions. Remember a couple years ago when the Amish children were

murdered in Lancaster, Pennsylvania? The Amish offered forgiveness to the one who murdered their children, an act almost incomprehensible to the rest of the world.

In 1956, five missionaries were stabbed and bled to death in Ecuador. The next year the widow of one of these men took her ten month old daughter and returned to live among the same tribe that had killed her husband and his companions. For two years she shared the Gospel message with them and worked to earn their trust. As a result, many tribe members became followers of Jesus, including some of the murderers. The thought of a widow going to live among her husband's killers is hard for us to imagine. Yet, forgiveness is part of what it means to be part of the Jesus parade, and to follow his path, a path which at times is obviously very different from the path of the world.

I remember the time my wife was on her way to a baby shower in a rural area. Her route led her through a small town. Unbeknown to her, it happened to be the day of a parade in that town, and they simply closed Main Street for the festivities! As an outsider, she had no idea how to get through town to her destination. My friends, the parade is life. All of us are on a journey, and we cannot avoid the parade. The question is this: Which parade are we in? Which journey are we on? Are we part of Caesar's show of pomp and circumstance, or are we part of Jesus' alternative lifestyle and other-worldly value system? Or are we caught somewhere between the two?

Some of us, I think, believe that we can somehow be in both parades. Occasionally, I will get invitations for events that are scheduled at the same time and I think, now can I go early to this one and late to that one, and somehow attend both? Some of you probably saw the movie, "27 Dresses." It's about a girl who has been in 27 weddings, sometimes two in one day! One of the scenes shows her in a dress at one wedding, then quickly running across town, changing into a different outfit and going down the aisle again. Then a frantic change and back to the first reception to give a toast to the bride and groom and so on.

As a pastor, I have never tried to conduct two weddings at once, but the idea of trying to be in two places at the same time, and multitasking along the way, hits mighty close to home. How many times I have sat in a meeting, and was working on, or at least thinking about, something else! A survey recently revealed that in Atlanta, Georgia, 28% of the people check their Blackberries or their cell phones for messages while they are in church! (Nobody in Cleveland would do that!) Because time is so precious, and we are so busy, someone coined the phrase "quality time." We may not spend much time with our wife or our kids or our parents or our grandparents, but the time we give them is "quality time." Is this just another excuse for trying to be in more than one parade at a time?

I have been the senior pastor of this church now for nearly eleven years. When I first came here there were folks who brought their kids to the altar to be baptized. These parents promised to raise their kids in the church. Most have been extremely faithful. But some have continued to make overtures about getting their kids involved in Sunday school and our music program and Kids Club and youth fellowship, but it never quite happens. Some of these kids are now young men and women. The parade has gone on without them, and they have missed out.

Our current economic situation around the world demonstrates what happens when we get in the wrong parade or try to run back and forth between the two. We have confused what is legal with what is moral, and now we are reaping the whirlwind as a society and as individuals. And the parades and the processions and the journey goes on.

The message of Jesus is that we cannot continue frantically running back and forth between parades. Jesus presents us with a choice, and alternative, and sooner or later we have to decide. In fact theologian Harvey Cox reminds us that “*Not to decide is to decide.*” (3)

Jesus forces us to choose which parade we will follow. His parade leads to confrontation with the ways of the world. His parade leads to a cross, to the death of all that Caesar holds out as valuable and important and alluring. Yet we know that Calvary’s cross and the death that follows is not the end of the story. It is not the end of the story for Jesus, and it is not the end of the story for you and for me. For beyond the cross there is new life and hope and resurrection, not just someday when we die, but here and now, today.

Do you feel like the gal in “27 Dresses,” frantically running from one activity to another? Are you still convinced that Caesar’s parade is the one that you need to stay with? Are you trying to run back and forth between Caesar’s display of power and prestige and Jesus’ example of discipleship and service? I find helpful the words of E. B. White who said, “*I arise in the morning, torn between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor the world. This makes it hard to plan the day!*” (4) Are you where God wants you to be? What is holding you back from living the life that God intends for you? Is it fear? Is it uncertainty? Whatever it may be, I hope that you will take Jesus seriously this day and align your priorities, your values, your lifestyle with his magnificent parade that leads to eternal life.

Which parade are you in today? Which parade do you want to be in? May God guide us all, and may we commit ourselves to following his path, to following where he leads.

*Prayer:* Dear God, on this Palm Sunday, we sense that you are presenting us with choices, that will ultimately mean the difference between life and death. Help us to realize that the choices of forgiveness, peace and love will lead to eternal life. Help us to follow that path, the Jesus parade that leads to eternal life. Amen.

Notes:

1. Borg, Marcus & Crossan, John Dominic. *The Last Week*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006. pp.1-30.
2. Norman, Jana & Turley, Paul. *Awaken: The Art of Imaginative Preaching*. Inver Grove Heights, Minn: Logos Productions, 2009. p. 27.
3. Thinkexist.com
4. Quoted in Bimler, Rich. *Holy Habits for the Holy Season of Lent*. Fenton, Mo.: Creative Communications for the Parish, 2009. p. 26.