

“Palm Sunday - Parade or Procession?”

Mark 11:1-11

Palm Sunday

Sermon Preached by Thomas P. Markey

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I hate parades. As is often the case, there's a story - actually three stories - behind such a strong sentiment.

- First, there was the Fourth of July Parade in Culver, Indiana. I couldn't tell you how old I was, but I was old enough to remember just how painful it was when I got sunblock in my eyes for the first time. There I was, writhing in pain, certain that both blindness and death were an imminent reality and all my family did to help me was to watch the parade.
- Second, there was the 500 Festival Parade. Again, I couldn't tell you how old I was, but, again, I was old enough that the memory persists. For some reason, a reason that still escapes me, other people felt as though they should attend the parade as well. Somehow, most of these people were taller than me and for some reason, they actually wanted to watch the parade. This meant that I spent the majority of the time seeing a parade that consisted of the back of a lot of bald heads. And, for the sake of effect, let's just say it was raining too.
- Third, there is my mom. My mom loves watching the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade on TV. So much so that when we growing up, that was the only thing that was allowed to be on the TV. We'd moan and groan, "Can we please watch something else?!" And then we'd get hit with one of my favorite lines, "I don't ask much from you all. I'm just asking that we watch the parade."

So, all of this is to say that thanks to sunblock, people who block my view, and my mom who blocked us from changing the channel, I hate parades.

Yet, despite my unhealthy disdain for parades, there's a parade coming, its coming from the east and I don't think any of us want to miss it.

Jesus is coming to Jerusalem. He's coming from the east. He's only a couple miles away - at Bethphage and Bethany - near the Mount of Olives. He's riding in on a colt. The disciples are by his side. Many people are there, spreading their cloaks and leafy branches, shouting, "Hosanna! Hosanna!"

Can you imagine what it must have been like to be there that day?

Look! Here he comes! Hosanna! Hosanna! Jesus! Over here! Over here! We might even try and sneak a picture.

The parade continues until Jesus enters Jerusalem. Everyone is watching and waiting. Soft shouts of “Hosanna!” continue, cheering Jesus on – “Hosanna!” “Hosanna!” “Hosanna!”

Jesus, surveying the area, slowly gets off of his donkey and begins to walk towards the temple. He goes into the temple, looked around at everything, and then comes back out before the crowd.

It is silent. All eyes are on Jesus. The anticipation is mounting – Jesus must be preparing to offer one of his powerful sermons or perform one of his many miracles.

And then he says, “It is already late, let us return to Bethany.” Jesus, along with his twelve disciples, head back to Bethany.

How deflating. How disappointing. Just like that, we’ve gone from excitement and exuberance, to an anticlimactic ending starring a too-tired Jesus who is ready to call it a day and head for bed. The Messiah had finally made it to Jerusalem, the boxes had all been checked, Zechariah’s prophecy was being fulfilled: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”¹

Yet, all he can manage to muster is some simple musing about the need for a full eight hours of sleep?

Make that reason number four as to why I hate parades.

It really is hard – impossible even – to ignore this particular ending of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem which we encounter in Mark’s gospel. This moment – Jesus entering into Jerusalem – is a momentous occasion in the life of Jesus. And so, one would expect that upon arriving in Jerusalem that something important, something shocking, and something dramatic might occur.

For instance, in Matthew’s account of this story, upon entering Jerusalem, Jesus immediately enters the temple and overturns the tables of the money changers.² Or, there’s Luke’s account of this story, first, Jesus weeps, then he offers a powerful and prophetic word, and then he makes his way to the temple, driving out those who were “selling things there.”³ Finally, there’s John’s account, there’s worship taking place, large crowds are flocking from everywhere to see and to hear Jesus, and Jesus proclaims that, “The hour has come...”⁴

This is the kind of parade I want to be a part of. There’s drama. There’s excitement. There’s action!

But, what if, all along, this really wasn’t meant to be a parade. After all, if we look closely, we may find that Jesus had been preparing us all the way, that the

¹ Zechariah 9:9, NRSV.

² Matthew 21:1-9

³ Luke 19:28-38

⁴ John 12:12-19

drama, the excitement, and the action had already taken place, and that maybe – just maybe – we had missed it.

In the first ten chapters of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has been on the move and he's been busy. He's made stops all over – Galilee, Capernaum, Nazareth – just to name a few. Equal parts prophet, preacher, teacher, healer, and miracle worker, Jesus has been on an extensive journey.

He's given sight to the blind, he's healed the sick, he's cleansed lepers, he's cast out demons, he's helped the paralyzed to walk, he's healed a withered hand, he's given new life to the dead, he's cured the hemorrhaging woman, he's fed crowds of 4000 and 5000, he's walked on water, he's been humbled by the Syrophenician woman, he's ensured that the deaf can hear, he's preached through parable, he's called his disciples, and – on three separate occasions – he's warned us that this was coming, that his death was imminent and that there is nothing that can be done to stop it.

Through all of this, Jesus has round-up a flock of frenzied and faithful followers. A flock that, in their world, would have been a rolodex of the misused and abused, the unwanted and the unseen, the lowly and the lesser-than, the disenfranchised and disinherited, or, as Jesus might say, the “least of these.” This was the flock – “the many people” – that joined Jesus on the road to Jerusalem.

Kate Bowler is an assistant professor at Duke Divinity School. She recently published a book titled *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*. In her book, Bowler explores the reality of being unexpectedly diagnosed with Stage IV colon cancer and the realities of her life thereafter. In her book, Bowler offers this powerful reflection of Palm Sunday:

I've been in treatment for five months, and now it is Palm Sunday. When we get to church, the children's Sunday school is closed, so we are faced with the terror of having a two-year-old in the main Sunday service. The sanctuary is swimming with children. They spin in circles, they climb on top of each other, but mostly they hit each other with palm fronds. In Christian art, a palm frond is a symbol of martyrdom, a little reminder to the viewer that this saint has earned his or her status in blood. But at every Palm Sunday service, the only whiff of martyrdom is the sense that every child is about three seconds from getting a palm frond in the eyeball. A tired volunteer still manages a smile and hands one to my two-year-old, who is delighted. Suddenly, the organ music swells and the doors fly open, and the procession has begun. It is, as all children's programming is, completely absurd and wonderful. Some children refuse to move past the pews that hold their parents. Others sprint ahead. Three begin to cry. But most are trying to hit their brothers in the eye. Zach is utterly still as he takes in the view. I know what he is seeing. His small world has not yet included vaulted ceilings and warm wooden beams and window after window of colored glass. One of his arms is wrapped around my neck, and the other is pointing everywhere as his wide blue eyes scan the room. We march up to the front of the sanctuary. Everyone is smiling broadly as they

stomp around the room. So taken are we by the spectacle of radiant youth that nobody is looking at the hymnal, and the space fills with loud, unself-conscious singing. I catch Toban's eye as I hold Zach like a prize lamb, and I can tell he is trying not to cry. We are thinking the same thing: Is this one of those moments? The kind that he will have to look back on alone? I hold Zach up a little higher so he can wave his frond in the air, and I try to smile as a few tears trickle down my cheeks. I know where Palm Sunday falls in the story of our God. Jesus is on a donkey trudging into Jerusalem, people waving their arms in the air, tattered coats thrown down before the One who marches toward His death. It is a celebration. It is a funeral procession. Holding Zach in my arms, fifteen days from my next scan, I wish I knew the difference.⁵

That's it. Jesus's entry into Jerusalem is equal parts parade and procession. It is equal parts triumph and tribulation. It is death and resurrection.

In this way, Palm Sunday is also an invitation. It is an invitation for us to engage Holy Week in a very honest and a very raw way. We've shouted "Hosanna!" and we are now eagerly awaiting the "Hallelujahs!" But before we do that, we too must travel along the road to Jerusalem.

Yet along the way, we find comfort in knowing that Jesus - God embodied - took on the flesh and experienced the world as we do. So whatever road we might be on, God is in the mess with us as we awkwardly, uncomfortably, and painfully attempt to navigate this road on an unbridled and untamed donkey. God is not some unattainable entity up in the sky observing our encounter with an ass. God is knee-deep in the manure with us - to celebrate and to be sad - to parade and to process.

There was perhaps no better example of this than yesterday. Yesterday, we witnessed this reality as we watched thousands of people across the country - mostly young people - take part in protests against gun violence. This was a national protest - the March for Our Lives protest - which was organized and facilitated by young people. There is no denying that it has been young people leading this charge, amplifying the need for serious and honest conversations around gun violence and intersections of race, class, and economics that fuel these realities.

It is almost as if another prophecy is being fulfilled as we watch the young children march - "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them."⁶

This particular road that these young people are marching along is much like the one Jesus and his followers took on their way to Jerusalem. It is a road of death, but it will lead to resurrection.

"Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" Amen.

⁵ Bowler, Kate. *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved* (p. 110-112). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Isaiah 11:6, NRSV.