

THE STRANGEST PARADE ROUTE

Philippians 2:5-11

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Matthew 21:1-11

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TEXT: Matthew 21:9 “The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’”

PURPOSE: To invite us to follow Jesus not just as part of a crowd shouting “Hosanna!” but all the way through the conflicts and agonies of this week, so that we may continue following him in his victory over death.

Palm Sunday in our church usually begins in delight with a generous dose of chaos. Our children tell the story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem with a sometimes rambunctious parade around the church. Many of you, like me, may have fond memories of our ‘donkey’ – it was a wagon sporting a cardboard donkey’s head in which the child playing Jesus got to ride. During Children’s Time, I would try to explain why we were waving palms to children who wanted to use their palms as swords.

Many churches, including ours, have traditionally ended this day’s service by telling the story of what’s known as Jesus’ ‘passion’ – the account beginning with Judas’ betrayal and ending with Jesus’ burial. One reason churches tell this story on this day is to make sure that folks who don’t worship on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday don’t think the story goes from today’s jubilant “Hosanna’s” straight to Easter’s victorious “Alleluia’s.” We won’t be reading that story from the Gospels today, although I invite you to read it this week, or better, to read the entire Holy Week drama in one of the Gospels.

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem was a kind of a parade, although it was more like a counter-parade. Rather than riding in on a war-horse, he rode a donkey, reminding people of the humble ruler anticipated by the prophet Zechariah who would command peace and do away with the implements of war. (Zechariah 9:10) One commentator I read suggested that “instead of entering Jerusalem on a tank, Jesus uses a tractor.”¹ And rather than sporting soldiers or at least well-disciplined marching bands, Jesus was accompanied by a spontaneous, disorganized band of Passover pilgrims.

But the strangest thing is the route of the parade, and the things that happened along the way. The parade, perhaps predictably, arrived at the temple. But instead of Jesus paying his respects or offering a sacrifice, he overturned the tables of the money-changers, freed animals intended for sacrifice, and, according to Matthew, performed a bunch of healings. (Matthew 21:12-17) That was all that happened on

¹Rev. Hines-Shah, in *The Christian Century*, March 25, 2020, Vol. 137, No. 7, “Living by the Word” p. 19

that first day, but I picture the parade as only beginning with his entering Jerusalem and lasting for the whole week. The day after his ride on that donkey, he returned to the temple, and took on the religious authorities, who were understandably upset by his behavior the previous day. He told a series of parables which indirectly criticized their sham righteousness and religiosity, and finally, denounced them directly with a series of 'woes', calling them, among other things, "whitewashed tombs," beautiful on the outside but full of death and filth inside. (Matthew 21:23-23:39) No doubt he had no interest in playing nice with the religious bigwigs.

Next, he went to the Mount of Olives with his disciples, which tradition recognized as the site from which God would definitively assert God's rule. There, he described how things would get much worse before they got better, and told some more parables concerning who would get into God's realm and who wouldn't. (Matthew 24-25)

From there, the drama of Holy Week picked up momentum, and moved quickly from one location to another. There were some private episodes: a dinner where a woman poured ointment on Jesus, which he described as being anointed for burial, the well-known Last Supper with his disciples, actually a Passover feast celebrating God's liberation of Israel from Egyptian bondage, and a trip to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he prayed while his disciples dozed.

It's in Gethsemane that the parade regrouped. A crowd came to arrest him, and took him to the house of the high priest, where a hasty hearing was organized to agree on trumped-up charges against him. The next day, the religious leaders took him to the governor. The governor sentenced him to be crucified. From there, a crowd paraded him to Golgotha, where he was crucified between two bandits. With that, the strangest parade route ever came to its final, horrible destination. When the guard sealed the tomb where his body was buried, it would seem that there was no chance of restarting the parade.

What we know is that the parade did start again. It started with a few women visiting the tomb where Jesus had been buried. It gathered momentum when they learned that Jesus had been raised. It made its way back to Galilee, where the risen Christ met his disciples, commissioned them to make disciples from all the nations, and promised them that he would forever be present among his followers. Now, we are participating in that parade, a parade still proclaiming the good news of Jesus, crucified and risen, a parade rejoicing in the presence of the one who is the reason

for us to be parading. We are participating in that parade even now, in this strange time, when regular parades have been cancelled and Palm Sunday children's processions are fond memories of past processions and hopes for the future ones. Even though everything is different, the story of Holy Week remains, and the invitation for us to find ourselves in the story stands. The point of retelling that story is not to recall what is past; the point is for us to discover ourselves among the characters in the story, and, as we see how we are like them, to also see how God is using us to accomplish God's purposes just as God used them.

Keep in mind that God used everyone in the story, fickle crowds as well as faltering followers, self-serving religious professionals as well as poor peasants seeking a hero, a woman displaying embarrassing devotion as well as a betrayer taking matters into his own hands, a political leader unable to oppose the will of a bloodthirsty mob as well as an executioner who realized he had crucified God's Son, a disciple who, in fear, denied his relationship with Jesus as well as a rich man who buried Jesus in his own tomb. They each have a part to play in the plan, not just way back then, but now, because they show us the ways that we are responding to Jesus. The more I sit with this core story of our faith, the more I recognize a little bit of myself in every one of the characters. And the more I realize God's power to save us from ourselves and to get us into the parade that's going on right now.

The Gospel parade through this pandemic is no more strange than the parade which began with Jesus riding a donkey and wound its way through conflict, betrayal, abandonment, and suffering. It is, for sure, a "parade-in-place," a virtual walk on the Via Dolorosa, the way of sorrows, as our hearts are deeply moved by the suffering and the heroism of these days, and we, in spirit and in the love of Christ, walk together through this crisis in an astounding display of global solidarity. What we who are participating in the Gospel parade know is that the risen Christ is walking right with us, sharing the total strangeness engulfing our world, but also, reminding us that even when all appears to be lost, God remains in charge and God's will for life will prevail. The parade is ours to join, and as we do, the world sees in us how the story of God's love made real in the gift of Jesus offers the hope, the forgiveness, and the perseverance that is exactly what we all most need.