

“A Quiet Parade”
April 5, 2020—Palm Sunday

Luke 19:29-40

As I described in my Simon of Cyrene sermon last Sunday, the city of Jerusalem was the epicenter of the Ancient world during the feast of the Passover. People made their way to the holy city from as far away as hundreds of miles, just for an opportunity to worship and pray among the Jewish faithful at the central temple.

Normally populated by forty thousand inhabitants, the number of people in Jerusalem ballooned during holiday festivals. And during Passover, the biggest religious festival of them all, the city of Jerusalem could barely contain the sheer number of regular residents and incoming tourists. In fact, the numbers of people inside the city limits during Passover multiplied fivefold to two hundred thousand and space and resources in the city were stretched to their capacity.

Against that historical backdrop, you and I gather with Christians around the world this Palm Sunday morning on the precipice of Holy Week. Normally, all of us would be gathered together in this sanctuary waving our palm branches and shouting, “Hosanna!” And normally, we would find a way to re-enact the Palm Sunday parade Luke described in today’s Gospel reading. Yet this Palm Sunday, like the Holy Week upcoming, will be one we long remember because nothing seems normal.

It turns out, however, that there is a missing piece of contextual information related to this morning’s Scripture lesson. Noted Biblical scholars, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in their book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach Us About Jesus’s Final Days in Jerusalem*, (HarperOne, 2009) point out something about the occasion of Palm Sunday that often goes unnoticed when we tell the story.

Today we recall the parade where a man rode into Jerusalem atop a colt from the north. But there were actually two parades heading into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. And the bigger, grander, more dramatic parade entered into Jerusalem from the west.

At the head of this alternate parade was the Roman governor whom I preached about two weeks ago...Pontius Pilate. Like most governors of Judea before him, Pontius Pilate spent a good deal of his time at his beach house in Caesarea by the sea. Who among us would blame him for that?

Yet when the feast of the Passover commenced and Jewish pilgrims came from all directions to mark the liberation of the Hebrew people from bondage and slavery, Pilate routinely made his way back to the city of Jerusalem. And like all Roman governors in the Ancient world, Pilate re-entered the city with a display of might and a particular purpose in mind.

While thousands of Jews were commemorating their Passover deliverance from Egyptian rule generations earlier, Pilate wanted to be sure the crowds weren't getting any ideas about rebelling against Roman rule while he was in office. So the parade from the west into the city was designed to be a show of force. A visual deterrent. A not at all subtle reminder to the Jewish people that they had better obey the laws and stick to the rules.

Imagine this bold display of Imperial Roman power... Legions of Roman soldiers dressed in crisp uniforms, wearing heavy armor and brandishing polished spears and shiny swords. Each one marching lockstep in perfect formation. Meanwhile, anyone watching on the sidelines heard and felt the unmistakable rumble of boots hitting the pavement in unison.

A cavalry of bridled horses, too, dressed as if for battle, trotted straight ahead, keeping pace alongside the soldiers. The rhythmic sound of a steady drumbeat punctuated the spectacle. A few of the soldiers carried long poles featuring heavy silk banners which bore insignias of Roman domination. A few other soldiers carried similar long poles with golden eagles perched on top, the ultimate symbol of Roman dominion over all the land. And forget about spectators shouting "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." Along Pilate's parade route, the only human voices anyone heard were Pilate and his lieutenants bellowing clear and sharp orders from atop their chariots.

Relishing this annual opportunity to strike fear in the hearts of any onlooker, Pilate was supremely confident in his regiment and in his unmitigated sovereignty. A confidence buttressed by several battalions of soldiers waiting in the wings in the western quarter of the city, ready to mobilize with brute force at Pilate's command...

Simultaneously, the parade unfolding outside the northern gates into Jerusalem paled in comparison every way imaginable. This parade was so humble, in fact, one could argue it was deliberately designed to counter Pilate's extravaganza.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus assigned two of his disciples to go to the entrance of a village, untie a colt that had never been ridden before and bring it back to Jesus. And, oh by the way, if anyone had questions, the two disciples were supposed to use as an alibi, "the Lord needs it."

Sure enough, the two disciples were questioned by the owner why they were stealing the owner's animal. And the disciples offered up the assurance from Jesus that the colt was needed. Surprisingly, Scripture gives us no indication that the owner of the colt balked at that minimal explanation. Presumably the owner also needed his colt, and he couldn't have been too happy just watching someone walk away with it.

Not to mention the fact that a previously unridden colt was probably not the ideal animal for Jesus to ride on in a parade. In any case, the two disciples did as they were

told and they brought Jesus the colt, put a cloth on the colt's back and helped Jesus mount the animal.

What followed was a nice parade. Not too loud. Not very fancy. Nowhere near over the top. A nice, quiet, little parade. The hardcore followers of Jesus stood by the side of the road praising God joyfully. The disciples walked alongside Jesus, running interference in case one of the Pharisees or one of the Roman soldiers decided to interrupt. All the while, Jesus focused his attention primarily on what awaited him inside Jerusalem's perimeter...

And now here we are on Palm Sunday in the year 2020, imagining two very different parades. With Jesus, I believe, asking us to choose between the two.

The sad truth is that we live in a world which most often glorifies the first parade; Pilate's parade coming in from the west. How often do human beings choose the way of awe and might, embracing violence and greed and fear as the best tactics to use to keep those around us in check? Thereby ensuring that some hold onto power while others remain powerless.

It's so easy for us to get caught up in the grand spectacle. The parade where everyone and everything looks bright and shiny and crisp. The one where nobody is out of place and everybody is in line. The performance full of charisma and celebrity and sound and fury...even if it signifies little or nothing in the end.

But on this Palm Sunday, God is asking us in Jesus Christ to choose and to embrace the other parade. The one that takes place on the other side of town where Jesus enters from the north. A Messiah riding on the back of a humble colt and bearing witness to the realm of God for which he would, by the end of this Holy Week, give his life. It was a realm completely opposite the realm Pilate was so eager to showcase during the Passover festival long ago...

Who's up for a quiet Palm Sunday parade then? Somehow it seems in keeping with the fact that everything around us and everything in the world is quieter than usual this year. If there was ever a time when the world required and needed the parade Jesus rode in and not the other parade, Palm Sunday 2020 is such a year.

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." Amen.