

A Parade Filled with Turmoil and Hope

John Wilkinson

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

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Matthew 21:1-11

I love a parade. Perhaps you do as well. And because I love a parade, I am sorry for many reasons that we are not gathered in the sanctuary this morning, a reality that would have been hard to fathom even a month ago. I have always loved the Palm Sunday processions, and was looking forward to my first here

Nonetheless, it is Palm Sunday, and we can envision our favorite parades – Macy's Thanksgiving Day, the Tournament of Roses, homecoming parades from high school.

Or these three parades in which I have participated, different on the surface, yet not so different at their core – people gathered with a purpose, moving forward...

- Some of you will remember 1976, the bicentennial of the United States. Our little community outside of Columbus, Ohio held a series of events, including a Memorial Day parade. I was chosen to carry a banner for my school. I wore a red, white and blue shirt and hideous blue jean shorts. We marched and marched and marched and ended up at the town cemetery, where a memorial service was held, featuring a rendition of "I want Jesus to walk with me," sung in a magnificent baritone by a distinguished man named Harold Jones, who was both a custodian at one of the schools and a minister in a church.
- Or a series of parades, 10 or more, on very warm July Saturdays – what used to be called the Gay Pride Parades and are now the Pride Parades – in Rochester, similar to Pride parades held in other cities. I walked with the church group. When we first started, we were bombarded by vile and hateful language from so-called religious groups, booming out over bullhorns. Those voices subsided over the years, as the parades became – more and more – mainstream and affirming, yet always a bit subversive,

and very fun. I walked for my own sake, and also to protest, to affirm, to be in solidarity and support.

- The final parade actually occurred on a Palm Sunday. I was in college and was spending a term in Israel and Palestine, studying history, political science, and religion. The timing was such that we were there for Holy Week. We followed the route that we just heard described, from the Mount of Olives into the city of Jerusalem. Since it was the west's schedule, local Christians – Russian and Syrian and Coptic Orthodox – did not participate, but thousands upon thousands – or at least it seemed that way – European and American young people did. We waved branches and sang. I remember us singing “Prepare ye the way of the Lord” from Godspell over and over. It was all very powerful.

Parades are many things. Celebrations. Commemorations. Public displays. My parades were all combinations of those many things and more – a bicentennial parade ending at a cemetery was patriotic, political, cultural, religious. A pride parade was cultural, political, subversive, provocative, celebratory, and religious.

And Palm Sunday, well, Palm Sunday is a little bit of everything, or a lot of everything. That group of young Americans and Europeans – myself included – had little idea of the radical nature of what we were doing marching into Jerusalem. We had been nurtured – and I am still nurtured – by childhood experiences of children waving palms and adults smiling at us adoringly. Those memories still matter – this was a celebration, after all. But there is more, much more.

Each gospel tells a slightly different version of it. John's gospel spends time pondering the disciples' response. Luke's includes one of my favorite passages: Jesus's response to the authorities who suggest he try to quiet the crowd. “I tell you,” he says, “if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Matthew – this morning's text – gives us the broad outline. The mysterious procurement of a donkey, and a colt. The double fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. The cloaks on the ground and the palm branches being waved. The shouting of Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna, which literally means “save us.” Save us, Jesus.

Then Matthew adds this detail, unique. “When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil...” Turmoil – literally, shaking, trembling, stirring. The whole city was shaking, as if Jesus’ entry was an earthquake. And the city asked: who is this? Who is this causing all this turmoil? The crowd knew – “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

So much is going on. A celebration, yes, identifying Jesus as one who saves. So it’s fine to wave a palm and cheer and be joyful. But there is more, much more. The paradox.

- The religious implications: the Pharisees watching all of this, watching the crowds grow in number and enthusiasm, realizing that their tidy and safe order is being threatened, as Jesus connects the people to God and faith in deep and profound and revolutionary ways.
- The political implications: the Roman officials see any trouble as a threat to order, rightly see in Jesus a threat to their authority.
- And Jesus himself: he has been saying all along that he must go to Jerusalem and die – die for faith, die for his followers.

The growing crowds, even his inner circle, either ignored that or didn’t understand. But Jesus does. He knows.

James Van Tholen writes: “The mystery is that the king of glory could enter the city of his people and be put to death there. The mystery is that the same ones who yelled so loudly ‘Hosanna!’ could a few days later yell more loudly ‘Crucify him’ and not realize they were yelling the same thing. So we praise this king with ‘Hosanna!’ and ‘All glory!’ but, when we do, we do it as he receives it – looking straight at the cross and knowing that that changes everything.” (“An Alien King,” *Where All Hope Lies*)

That is why we can say “hosanna.” It is also why the whole city is in turmoil. It is why any city would be in turmoil when Jesus enters – then and now – because he first defies and then transforms every expectation about who he is and what following him looks like.

He is both religious and political.

- He is religious not in the sense that he will claim a place of prominence in the temple hierarchy but in his crystal-clear, laser focus on God’s justice, his

absolute insistence on the radical nature of God's love and making that love incarnate, his word-in-fleshness, filled with grace and truth.

- He is political not that he is running for office, or staging a palace coup, or entering the city in a black Escalade or on a grand stallion, but that he knows that faith cannot and should not be contained within the walls of institutional religion, the temple then or the church to come, that talking about justice is talking about how the world is organized, that in order for reconciliation to happen systems and principalities must be confronted and transformed.

That's why the whole city is in turmoil. Jesus brings upheaval with him, along with everything else. Some welcome it; some do not.

No Palm Sunday parade this year, or Easter egg hunts, or commencements, or opening days, or March Madness, no weddings OR funerals, year-end concerts and plays.

Yet even though we will not gather in this place this morning to remember that first parade, and even though there will be NO public gatherings, in this city or anywhere, for quite a while, that does not mean many things.

- It does *not* mean that Jesus will not enter our world, our cities, our homes, our church. What that looks like will be notably different, but that it will happen, and that it will be impactful, remains true.
- It does not mean that he will not create turmoil; and if he doesn't, that means we are not paying attention.
- It does *not* mean that on this day, we do not celebrate and wave palms and shout hosanna for a bit, even over a screen, and then quickly pivot to this unfolding week – a last meal, a betrayal, a kangaroo court, an execution.

That rhythm continues to happen – 2000 years ago and this year, COVID 19 or no, and perhaps especially in this moment, or at least with its own unique focus.

His entry, and its truth, remain unchanged. This is the prophet Jesus. They knew. We know. Jill Duffield writes that "Our world, our lives, the whole city is stirred up right now. Then, as now, Jesus comes into places and spaces of upheaval, injustice, sickness, need and evil. He came into this shaken-up earthly realm to

save it, to bring healing and wholeness, forgiveness and mercy, grace upon grace.”

So we wave palms, and shout hosanna. As we cast our eyes on him, we also cast our eyes where he does – into the future – this week, his death, and beyond his death, with hope.

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