

“The Two Parades” GPPC 3-25-18
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29, Mark 11:1-11

My life has been lived in parades. An early childhood memory is going to a parade in town with my family and being impressed by the decorated floats, people walking in groups (sometimes wearing odd outfits), and especially the bands with their drums and bass drums that made me feel as though my heart would beat outside my chest.

By the time I was in high school, I marched with the band in parades so hot you thought you'd pass out and so cold you thought your lips would freeze to the mouthpiece. After college I was a high school band director for two years and, yes, the bands marched in parades and I tried to keep the kids in step and in some semblance of formation.

In U.S. Army basic training there were more parades and more standing at attention so long you'd feel dizzy and some people did pass out. Don't lock your knees! And then the Army Band of New York City and parades all over the city and as far north as Fort Drum, New York on the Canadian border, and as far south as Maryland. And Muhammed Ali was the grand marshal for one parade we were in and while we stood

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at attention he came over and poked at the guy standing next to me just to see if he would move. He did not.

And then there is the church and its parades. Choirs processing and recessing. Youth marching in with items that adorn the chancel—cross, candles, flowers. And maybe the best parade of all, the Christmas pageant with little baaing sheep, throngs of beautiful angels, a great giggling camel, smiling wise men, laughing kings, Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus whom we hope is not in a crying mood.

My life has been lived in parades. And maybe yours has too.

But what do parades signify? That depends, doesn't it?

When a sports team wins a championship, the parade shows appreciation and celebration. When a U.S. president is elected, the inaugural parade suggests the peaceful transfer (or continuance) of power and the pomp and ceremony of the occasion.

The former Soviet Union used to hold vast military parades complete with troops, tanks, and missiles. The goal was to demonstrate their military power and to intimidate their adversaries.

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But in recent decades the United States has usually not held military parades, except in wartime or as part of national holidays such as Veterans Day, Memorial Day, or the 4th of July. I was part of a much-belated “thank you” parade for Vietnam veterans in New York City in 1985.

But our country doesn’t often have military parades, I suppose because they are expensive and we don’t need to show off our military prowess; everybody knows our military is the greatest in the world. According to a United Nations report, our country “spends more on national defense than China, Saudi Arabia, Russia, the United Kingdom, India, France and Japan combined,” but “US infant mortality rates in 2013 were the highest in the developed world.” (Tom McCarthy, “The Guardian,” Feb. 9, 2018.) We have the most powerful military on the planet, but at a steep price as funding for other programs of social uplift is short-changed.

All four of the Bible’s gospels tell about Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, a parade, and part of what we often call Palm Sunday (though John is the only gospel writer who actually mentions palms specifically).

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Bible scholars believe that there are really two parades that take place on this day.

The first parade is held on behalf of the Roman Empire. As one writer says, “When the governor Pilate comes into Jerusalem, he enters the city from the west with an excessive show of military pomp and circumstance. He leads a large group of cavalry and foot soldiers, and rides an impressive stallion. He is the highest representative of the imperial power of Rome in the area.... Pilate represents the emperor himself, the ‘son of god,’ ‘lord of all,’ and ‘savior of the world.’ His entry into Jerusalem is clearly a demonstration of the ever-present Roman power.” (Wolfgang H. Stahlberg in *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, 340.)

Pilate’s parade, the parade of Empire, is meant to have the people shaking in their shoes, terrified of what the Romans might do if they step out of line. We can imagine the citizens standing along the streets, arms crossed, watching in grim silence and dread as Empire parades its threat of torture and crucifixion before them.

But the other parade is held on behalf of Jesus. He comes from the east. And his parade is radically different from the Empire’s. Jesus sends

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a couple of disciples ahead to a village to get a never-ridden colt (ritually clean and fit for royalty, but not a war stallion). Jesus sends the disciples with peculiar instructions that they are simply to borrow the colt, and if challenged, to say, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back immediately.’ Apparently Jesus is already well known in the area or this is a way of expressing his divine knowledge and power.

So the disciples are allowed to bring him the colt. And then they put their cloaks on it and many people spread their cloaks in the road and others put leafy branches in the road. It’s sort of a makeshift red carpet. And the mood is joyous. “Hosanna!” they shout. And this literally means, “God save!” but at this point it probably just means something such as “Yay!”

“Hosanna!” they yell. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!”

The people not only celebrate that Jesus comes in the name of the Lord, (that is the authority of God), they also celebrate God’s reign that is coming. In many ways, what they are doing is what we are doing—a kind of worship parade. In spite of all the terrible things happening

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around them, in spite of the violence of Empire, they glimpse God's kingdom breaking into history. So they throw down their cloaks and branches. Hosanna!

Of course, sometimes you hear preachers say that in just a few days these same people who are celebrating Jesus will turn on him and shout, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" And I think I've preached that myself, and said that we are like those people ourselves.

But here's the thing; we just don't know if it's true. More likely these people do *not* later on demand Jesus' crucifixion. And they aren't there at the cross mocking Jesus either. Instead, maybe they still celebrate him, even love him. But we never read that they stood up for him. Maybe they stood up and spoke up, but their voices were drowned out by hatred. Or maybe they were afraid and ran away. Or maybe they just lost their commitment and got busy with other things.

Are we are like those people? We're not yelling for Jesus' crucifixion. Maybe we still celebrate him, even love him. But we're not standing up for Jesus with our lives and our priorities. We're timid, or lazy, or we make excuses, or we're cowed by what we face. Or maybe

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we've lost our commitment to follow Jesus with our worship, with the full, grateful stewardship of our time, abilities, and money, and with service to "the least of these" in Christ's name, because it's difficult sometimes.

If any of that's true, then we should pray for God to grant us renewal and repentance, and pray for God to get us marching in that Palm Sunday parade again.

There is one final detail of the story that has long fascinated me. In verse 11, Mark mentions something that the other three gospel writers leave out. He says, "Then Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve."

Now some biblical scholars say this is anti-climactic. Jesus just enters Jerusalem, goes into the temple, looks around, it's late, and he goes back to Bethany with the twelve. Ho hum.

Or is it?

Some of you may have seen the 1976 movie "Rocky" (one of my top five movies of all time). You may recall that Rocky is this second-

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rate fighter in Philadelphia who gets the chance to fight the heavyweight champion of the world, Apollo Creed. Creed is a gifted and terrifying champion, a Muhammed Ali character who dispatches opponents with a dancing, lightning flourish and ease. And despite several weeks of grueling training, Rocky, everyone assumes, has no chance.

On the night before the fight, Rocky can't sleep. So he makes his way down to the Spectrum, into the cavernous arena, and then climbs through the ropes and stands in the ring. And Rocky walks around the ring just looking around. He sees thousands of empty seats and the empty ring. The public address system with its massive speakers hovers by cables overhead. A gigantic American flag is suspended from the ceiling and dozens of smaller flag tapestries are draped from seating areas. And hanging from the rafters are enormous banners of Apollo Creed and him. Rocky just looks. He swallows, taking it all in. He knows the fight that's coming.

Jesus went into Jerusalem and into the temple "and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late...." This is not an anti-climax. This is Jesus taking one last look around. It's already late.

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Jesus is fully human and fully divine. So he doesn't know everything at this point. But he has some inkling of the battle that is coming, a battle not just against the Empire but against evil, suffering, and death all aligned against him, enormous and vicious. And to probably anybody watching at the time, he seems to have no shot. No chance. The best he can hope for is just to endure and battle for a while. After all, the Empire always wins.

But miracle of miracles, we know how the story finally ends, don't we? Not just with betrayal and crucifixion but also with resurrection. We know how the story ends.

So we have a decision to make. Which parade do we want to march in, Empire's or Christ's? Empire with all its image, arrogance, and violence promises much. Me first. Our country first. To heck with the rest of the world. Be aggressive. Take what we want. Who can stop us? We're Empire, baby!

You know you're marching in Empire's parade when selfishness, power and violence are the name of the game. You know you're marching in Empire's parade when you drive like a rude jerk. You know

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you're marching in Empire's parade if you aren't willing to explore all solutions to gun violence. You know you're marching in Empire's parade when you don't care about other people having a wage they can live on or what happens to folks without health insurance. You know you're marching in Empire's parade when you've made a commitment to follow Jesus in your baptism and confirmation, but you have abandoned that commitment for other priorities.

But then there is Christ's parade. It marches to a different music, the music of God's voice. This parade is the eternal march of love. Here the name of the game is humility, self-giving, kindness, generosity, sacrifice, mercy, and justice. Christ's parade will march in the cold rain to protect children. Christ's parade will bring fair treatment of immigrants. Christ's parade will speak truth in a world of lies. Christ's parade will work to make sure all people are fed, housed, educated, and cherished. Christ's parade will build a strong church that sets aside disagreements and excuses and comes together in grateful worship, prayer, study, and service.

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Which parade are you and I marching in? As Mark says it's "already late." Time is short. If we're marching in Empire's parade, let us pray for God to help us march in Christ's parade with its strange and wonderful rhythm that seems out of step with Empire, but is, in fact, in step with God's will. Which parade are you and I marching in?

Spiritual practice: Sacrifice. As part of our Lenten theme "Faith Takes Practice" I invite you, if you are willing, to close your eyes. Breathe slowly and deeply, slowly and deeply. I want you to image an obstacle to your faithfulness to God. What is it that is holding you back from commitment? What sacrifice do you need to make in order to follow Christ more fully in your life?