

Sunday, April 2, 2023
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11
“A Cheering, Chanting, Dizzy Crowd”
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

How many of you have ever attended a huge festival or maybe the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade or the Boston Marathon? Every hotel room in town is booked, every store is open, there are vendors on the street selling food, items of clothing, and trinkets, people on street corners playing music, and people up and down the streets waiting for the big event to happen. Well, this is what the Passover Festival looked like back in the day of Jesus. Passover week was the most sacred week of the Jewish year. A time to commemorate their freedom from slavery in Egypt so long ago. Everyone who could, went to Jerusalem. The crowds were so tremendous, guards were posted everywhere, just to keep order.

So, imagine that spring day in the year 30 of two very different processions or parades entering Jerusalem. One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession.

From the east, Jesus rode a donkey, a colt in fact, which would have put him on eye level with the crowds. Down he came from the Mount of Olives, cheered on by his followers who threw their cloaks and branches on the streets, waved palm branches and shouted “hosanna” Save us! Jesus, from the peasant village of Nazareth, who carried a message about the kingdom of God: of equality, justice, love. The one who was coming in the name of the Lord, quietly, slowly, but profoundly, proclaiming the peaceful reign of God.

On the opposite side of the city, a very different procession or parade was coming from the west. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of an imperial cavalry, highly decorated, proud horses, sitting high above the people, and soldiers, so many soldiers. His group approached the city brandishing weapons, banners, sun glinting on metal and polls. The sounds: marching of feet, creaking of leather, clinking of bridles, beating of drums, swirling of dust. Power, authority, majesty and control. He came to show the importance of the empire and military occupation, with a goal to make sure oppressed people did not find deliverance. (1) And everyone knew who was in control.

Two very different processions. And we know Jesus planned this alternative procession into the city, precisely and purposefully, with the goal to completely contrast what was happening on the other side of the city. The one riding that donkey had been sent to offer the world another way, another path to victory, an avenue to true peace. Complete with a young donkey, not a horse. For we know that Jesus could have walked into the city that day. Or for that matter, he had some connections with the wealthy (think Zacchaeus or Nicodemus.) Certainly, he could have borrowed a horse instead. Rather, he sent his disciples to get a donkey:

Think about that donkey for a minute. I always thought he chose the donkey because it was a humble animal. But did you know that while there are more than 40 million donkeys alive in the world today, ninety-six percent of them live in underdeveloped countries. They are owned and used by poor people. They serve as pack animals. Their energy and movement is harnessed for pumping water for the thirsty and milling grain for the hungry. A donkey is known as the protector of their owner if made vulnerable, the one even willing to die for their owner, so that they may live. No wonder Jesus chose a donkey. (2)

And the crowd that day? They wanted a parade, they needed a parade. So, hearing Jesus is coming the cheering, chanting, dizzy with expectation crowd, rolled out the red carpet for this man, as if he was just as important as the King or the Governor. To sing Hosanna was a shout of victory after a battle was won, to lay their coats or cloaks was literally like rolling out the red carpet so he wouldn't have to walk on the dusty roads, and to wave palms was like banners in a parade or confetti on the returning champion team. Not exactly marching bands or beautifully decorated floats but the best they could do. The crowd had heard his stories, seen his miracles and knew he was a prophet. Down he came from the Mount of Olives, cheered on by his followers who shouted "hosanna! Hosanna save us", they cried. They wanted and expected a revolutionary to overthrow the government and be their new king. They wanted a parade, but Jesus came riding a donkey, not above the people looking down on them but at eye level, an equal. Jesus would have no part of being the kind of king they wanted. Jesus was committed to being God's kind of king.

You see we are not that different from those cheering crowds back then. But as one pastor describes, while we identify with their cry, we are also aware of their confusion. "Yes, they want salvation but on their own terms, perhaps imagined as a dramatic defeat of the Roman and restoration of Israel. What they don't imagine, what they don't really want, truth be told, is a Savior who dies. A savior who identifies with them completely and fully, rather than elevates them to where they'd like to be. They don't want a God who changes them by challenging their view of themselves, their neighbors, and their values, they want a God who reinforces and even validates their values and beliefs. Hosanna Save us, but don't change us". (3)

Their confusion is similar to our confusion. Save us doesn't mean, solve our problems, answer our questions, O God. We too like the idea of being saved but don't always understand what it means to be changed, transformed in the eyes of God. How does God save us? How does God save you? Or how is God changing you? I wonder, how will this congregation change now that Wayne is gone and new leadership is to come? You know, three years ago we were on lockdown with the pandemic. Remember that? How has the past three years changed you, transformed you and this church? One thing I know for sure, I feel so blessed with the things we took for granted, worshipping together, eating and celebrating together. The parties, the parades. Getting out there again and serving others. Being the church. But church has changed. We have changed.

We all would rather be saved, fixed, cured, but God is in the business of transforming us. Saving us in that way. Because here's the thing. Christianity is not a self-improvement program, it is a transforming program, a transforming program where we are moved to look outward, not inward. To see the needs of others rather than our own hopes. Our existence, our meaning, our well-being, our future is bound up in the existence, meaning, well-being, and future of those around us. In here, and out there.

We need this transformation, why? Because it is how we can enter the week ahead. If we really enter this coming Holy Week with all of the confusion and emotions as the disciples did, and really allow those feelings to invade our lives, it might allow us to reflect in a much deeper way what is really going on in this world and in our lives in particular, and where God is moving us. You see if we don't face the struggle that Christ did, if we go from the parade of Palm Sunday to the party of Easter, if we believe life is one long party for those who trust in God, then what happens when the party ends, the parade is over? What happens when we enter a

really hard time in our lives, where death, suffering, pain, loss, permeate our lives? Does faith end because good times have been put on hold? If we don't face the struggle of Jesus, then we can't face our own struggle with the confidence and assurance that God is with us and we are never alone.

That triumphal entry of Jesus wasn't a first century Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, it was a statement. It was an in-your-face statement to those in power, those looking at him as a heretic, dangerously drawing large crowds and all those miracles. And here's the real surprise in this story. Jesus enters Jerusalem amid the cries which he knows will turn, turn into accusations. He avoids the privilege of his divine state and takes on the form of a servant and dies the death of an outcast. Why does he do this? It's not to show us how messed up we are, we already know that. It was to invite us into an authentic relationship with God and with each other. Because in the end, Christ does come to save us, hosanna, not from the Romans, not from the authority, but from ourselves, from a world that teaches that what matters most is what I want rather than sees the possibility, that meeting my neighbor's need will also satisfy my own heart's deepest desire. Jesus came to save yes, but also to transform. He came to form a single humanity that knows itself and those around them as God's people.

And so I ask you this, if Jesus rode or walked or came into the town of Westerly today, what would he be riding in or on? What would demonstrate to us right away that he associates with the poor, the vulnerable, that he would sacrifice anything, for us to begin to understand God, to show mercy and kindness and grace. AND - What kind of parade do we need?

Today we need to be reminded, Jesus brought a different kind of parade. Not a majestic parade only for the chosen, only for the pure, but a march, a procession for people who expected it the least. A procession of justice and a different kind of peace. And the events of this week, let me dare to describe what I think justice and peace really look like.

Jesus said, blessed are the peacemakers, but to be a peacemaker is about more than waving signs or saying prayers, it is about working to end violence. Violence with weapons, violence with harsh words, violence by cold indifference. It's not about taking away rights, it's about treating human life with dignity, it's about our country's mental health crisis, it's about monitoring violent video games which dulls the mind to violence. It's about working to create a faith community which is a haven of peace; believing every human being is a child of God, regardless of race, language, sexual orientation or culture; celebrating and welcoming diverse faces of Christ in our worship and in our ministries. Teaching our children how to resolve differences non-violently and respectfully and having the courage to model it in our behavior. To serve those most vulnerable and most in need and strive in our community for equal opportunities for employment, adequate housing, fair education, safety and wellbeing for all. And that's a very different parade.

It's a parade with one message, and that message is so simple – love. Love one another. Jesus loved people even when they deserved love the least, when they were least lovable. He didn't expect righteousness, justice, he taught it, he demanded it, knowing that love and sacrifice are more fulfilling and powerful than authority and rulers. Everything about the parade and all of the events of this holy week to come were purposely created or happened because Jesus knew what was to come. And here and now, it's for us to shout with our lips and our lives, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" .

As Dr. Taylor states, “It’s our turn now, our turn, to show the world what God looks like, to show the world what love looks like, to show the world what it looks like to love your enemies, and not only your enemies, but the immigrant, and the alien, the stranger, and the other. Show the world what it looks like to forgive those who trespass against you, to forgive the one who sinned against you – who sinned against you – to forgive this one not once, not seven times, but seventy times seven times. Show the world.” (4) It’s our turn to show the world what mercy looks like, what justice looks like, to be the change we need to see in others.

Let us present a Jesus procession, a parade of righteousness, of justice, of equality, of respect, of forgiveness. A procession of people, humble, protective, giving, showing unconditional love to the world, being a family which helps others move through their holy weeks of hard times, so that we can come together next week in the knowledge that we are a resurrection people. We have been transformed, we are saved, we are forgiven, we are loved.

I close with the words of the Hymn:
A Cheering, Chanting, Dizzy Crowd
by Thomas Troeger

*The cheering, chanting, dizzy crowd it stripped the green trees bare,
And hailing Christ as king aloud, waved branches in the air.
They laid their garments in the road and spread his path with palms
and vows of lasting love bestowed with royal hymns and psalms.*

*When day dimmed down to deepening dark the crowd began to fade
till only trampled leaves and bark were left from the parade.
Lest we be fooled because our hearts have surged with passing praise,
Remind us, God, as this week starts where Christ has fixed his gaze.
Instead of palms, a winding sheet will have to be unrolled,
A carpet much more fit to greet the king a cross will hold.*

O Give thanks to the Lord for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever.
His steadfast love endures forever. Amen.

(1) Borg, Dr. Marcus and Cossan, The Rev. John Dominic. The First Week, Day One.

(2) Hunt, The Rev. Dr. Janet H. Humble and Mounted on a Donkey.

(3) Lose, The Rev. David. Cries, Confusion, Compassion. 3/22/18.

(4) Taylor, The Rev. Dr. Nancy Taylor. Players and Protagonists in the Kingdom of God. 3/20/16.