

Date: April 1, 2007

SUNDAY: Palm

SERMON: A Tale of Two Processions

Text(s): Isaiah 50:4-9; Luke 19:29-40

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Who doesn't love a parade? Parades are almost as universal a phenomenon as religion. Certainly everywhere we've traveled or lived, there have been parades. When our kids were very small, we took them to the many parades that were held in our city of Kuching in Borneo. Two of the important ones took place within fifteen days. On the first day of Chinese New Year, there were parades of Lion Dancers who wove their way in and out of peoples' houses, setting off firecrackers to bring good luck for the new year. Fifteen days later came the lantern festival which marked the end of the New Year celebrations. Just this week, our Christian Ed director, Sue Fitzgerald, who's on sabbatical leave in New Zealand with her husband John, sent us some photos of the Chinese community in Auckland in their annual Lantern Festival, and that really took us back in our memories of watching the parade of brightly colored paper lanterns every year in Malaysia. In France, on July 14, Bastille Day, the French remembrance of their Revolution was always marked by a very militaristic parade down the Champs Elysees, with uniformed members of every national service interspersed with tanks and self-propelled cannons and flyovers by military jets streaming the blue, white, and red colors of the French flag. Our grandson, who was only a year old at the time, got his first taste of parades here in Brunswick on Memorial Day last May. He was, and still is, really into fire trucks and tractors, and motorcycles and any other noisy machinery, so we had no trouble keeping him interested.

Parades are just a lot of fun, aren't they? I don't imagine many of us, however, watch a parade the same way that composer Charles Ives did who listened, as well as watched. His *Holiday Symphony* is the result of his listening at parades. In it, we hear one marching band

approach, playing *Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean*, and begin to fade out as it goes by, while the next one playing "Yankee Doodle" or whatever, in a different key and rhythm, begins to swell as it draws closer. And parades with bands are really like that, aren't they? We just usually don't pay as much attention to the musical cacaphony as Ives did or have the ability to turn it into a symphony.

On Palm Sunday, every year, we commemorate one of the more important parades in our religious tradition—the so-called "triumphal entry" of Jesus into Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Usually we do it with palm branches, although only the version of the story in John's gospel mentions palms, and Luke's version, which is our lesson today, doesn't mention branches at all.

But the parade of followers who hailed Jesus' entry into Jerusalem wasn't the only parade going on. As Jesus and his motley group of followers entered Jerusalem from the east, coming from the Jericho road and down the Mount of Olives, another parade was entering Jerusalem from the west. We don't read about this parade in the Bible, but we know about it from other sources. It was the annual procession of Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator of Judea, who with several cohorts of Roman soldiers, processed up from the Roman imperial capital of Caesarea on the coast to Jerusalem, to keep the peace during the Passover festival. And it's almost certain that the writer of the Gospel of Mark, whose version of Jesus' procession into Jerusalem was the first narrative to be written, and was the source for Luke's which we read this morning, deliberately constructed his story as an ironic counterpoint to that other procession. The other gospel writers, added their own touches to make their own points, but in all of them, the Jesus' procession gains its meaning as an deliberately staged, ironic counterpoint to Pilate's procession.

Pilate's procession was the visible manifestation of imperial Roman power and governance. Jerusalem was the political and

religious capital for the inhabitants of Judea, but it was not the capital for the Roman occupation government. That was located at Caesarea, the magnificent coastal city, built by Herod the Great, the king of Judea, and loyal vassal of Rome, who died at the time of Jesus' birth. He dedicated the city to Caesar Augustus, and made it the most important and magnificent city in Palestine, with a deep water port, an aqueduct, a coliseum, and a hippodrome. From there, Roman imperial rule was extended to the provinces.

But once a year, during Passover, the Roman procurator moved his headquarters to Jerusalem in a show of strength designed to prevent any outbreaks of insurgency and violent rebellion against Roman rule. Such outbreaks were a constant danger, both because Roman rule imposed real hardship economically on their subject nations, and because, no one likes the foot of a foreign power on their necks. One of the consequences of creating an empire is the constant threat of insurgency. And it had already happened repeatedly in Jerusalem when crowds from all over— especially from the notoriously rebellious province of Galilee— gathered in Jerusalem for the main religious festival of the year.

It wasn't that the Jews, as a people, were necessarily more rebellious than other Roman subjects; many of the Jewish aristocracy welcomed Roman civilization, law, and trade. But at the heart of Judaism, both of Jewish religious and national identity, was the *Haggadah*, the story of the Exodus, Israel's deliverance from Egyptian imperial rule, 1200 years earlier under their great leader and prophet Moses. Passover was the celebration of that deliverance. So if the holy city Jerusalem is thronged with religious pilgrims from all over for the celebration of their historic deliverance from one imperial power, their present experience of being under the foot of another imperial power made it all but certain that Jerusalem during Passover would be a tinderbox, a powder-keg just

waiting to explode. We know from Roman records and from the reports of the Jewish historian Josephus that two very lethal riots took place both before and after the year 30, which was probably the year Jesus was crucified. And we know that Pontius Pilate had the reputation of brutally suppressing even any hint of rebellion before it could get started or reacting with incredible violence if it did. Our gospel lesson just a few weeks ago made a reference to his slaughter of some Galileans who were sacrificing in the temple at Passover. And we know that just a few years after Jesus' crucifixion, the emperor Tiberius, who was Pilate's personal friend, was forced to fire him as Procurator of Judea and recall him to Rome for some other posting because his brutality was inspiring more rebellion that it was suppressing.

So each year, a week or so before Passover, Pilate and a strong contingent of troops would arrive in Jerusalem and set up fairly tight security to keep the peace— the peace of Roman rule, that is. And we all know what kind of peace that was. Rome's own historian Tacitus recorded the words of Calgacus, the Caledonian tribal leader who was vanquished by the Roman legions in the year 83. Calgacus, surveying the utter defeat of his people and the ruin of his land, said of his Roman conquerors, "They made a desert, and called it peace."

Jesus' procession, on the other hand, couldn't have been more different than Pilate's. In Pilate's procession, Pilate would have ridden his war horse or his official carriage, accompanied by soldiers in full battle gear. No doubt there were many people along the route who, even if they hated Pilate, and the imperial rule he symbolized and enforced, would nevertheless turn out for the spectacle of a parade. Can't you just picture a bunch of children marching behind the soldiers pretending that they are soldiers too?

Jesus, on the other hand, rode a donkey, the humblest beast of burden, accompanied by his

ragtag band of disciples— fishermen, a reformed tax collector, some women, who spread their cloaks on the road in front of him, and hail him as a king, using words drawn from Psalm 118, one of the royal psalms celebrating the accession of a new king to his throne.

Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heave, and glory in the highest!

Luke has made one change, however, in the wording from that in Psalm 118. In that psalm, although it is clearly about the king whose coronation is being celebrated, the sentence actually reads, “Blessed is the *one* who comes in the name of the Lord.” Luke changes the word “one” to “king,” thereby making a rather bald political statement. St. Mark’s version even more explicitly makes that political claim. He adds another line: *Blessed is the kingdom of our ancestor David that is coming.*

The church has continued to use those words down through the centuries in our communion liturgy, though we have gone back to the original wording of the psalm, “Blessed is the *one* who comes in the name of the Lord.” That may seem like a minor point, but it completely drops out the scandalous political claim that Jesus and his followers were making, or were perceived as having made with their little parody of a parade. In the Gospel accounts of Palm Sunday, it is clear that such a claim is being made; Jesus is a different kind of king than the Roman emperor. His kingdom is a different kind of kingdom than that of imperial Roman rule. This king’s kingdom does not consist of the trappings or the violence of empire. This king comes on a peaceful donkey rather than a warhorse. This king does not sit on a throne in a palace with all the authority and lethal power of the empire behind him to enforce his will. This king, before week’s end, will end up nailed to a throne that consists of two rough pieces of wood, fastened together into a cross, erected on the town dump outside the city gates.

In fact, this parade, and the implicit claim it made, is precisely the main reason Jesus was crucified. Combined with his action a few days later in driving the moneychangers and merchants out of the Temple, the stage was set for his arrest and execution. The Temple authorities, primarily the aristocratic hereditary priests, generally collaborated with Roman rule, because it served their economic and political interests. Their anxieties about this upstart prophet and itinerant preacher from Galilee are very clear in the remainder of the passion story. Even some of the Pharisees who were sympathetic to Jesus’ cause, plead with him in today’s part of the story to make his disciples stop acclaiming him as a king. They understand the implications of this claim. They know where it will lead, and even if they have respect for Jesus as a teacher, or even, as some scholars have suggested, a member of their own sect, they know this parody of a parade is going to mean trouble. But Jesus replies to their plea: *I tell you, if these were silent, even the very stones would cry out.*

In a recent article in *The Christian Century* (March 20, 2007), on Jesus’ last week, New Testament scholars John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg describe the contrast between Pilate’s procession and Jesus’ procession this way: “Jesus versus Pilate, the nonviolence of the kingdom of God versus the violence of the empire. Two arrivals, two entrances, two processions— and our Christian Lent is about repentance for being in the wrong procession, and preparation to abandon it for its alternative.”

The world is full of parades, or as we might more frequently say, full of “bandwagons,” isn’t it? And sometimes it’s really hard to know which parade to join, which bandwagon to hop on. It’s so easy and so tempting to join the wrong ones and so hard, sometimes, to get in the right procession. It’s so easy to simply get caught up in the enthusiasm of the crowds and join the procession which has the loudest brass bands or the most elaborate floats or the greatest number

of celebrities or the most charismatic leaders. It's easy to miss the counter-procession that is taking place on the other side of town— the one where Jesus is riding on a humble donkey, claiming a kingdom, not by violence, but by courageous, self-sacrificing love, accepting his place among the victims of imperial power. In so doing, for those with the eyes of faith to see it, he bears witness to the futility of the world's kind of power in establishing God's peace, God's *shalom*, and points his followers to a different way.

Choosing which procession to join is really what Holy Week is all about. As we live through the story of Jesus' procession toward the cross once again this year, that is the challenge and the invitation to us. Which ruler will we acknowledge as our true sovereign? To whose kingdom will we pledge our allegiance? And what will be the implications of our choice for us and for our world?