

A Parade with a Purpose

A sermon preached by

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Mark 11:1-11 Common English Bible (CEB)

When Jesus and his followers approached Jerusalem, they came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives. Jesus gave two disciples a task,² saying to them, “Go into the village over there. As soon as you enter it, you will find tied up there a colt that no one has ridden. Untie it and bring it here.”³ If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘Its master needs it, and he will send it back right away.’”

⁴ They went and found a colt tied to a gate outside on the street, and they untied it. ⁵ Some people standing around said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” ⁶ They told them just what Jesus said, and they left them alone. ⁷ They brought the colt to Jesus and threw their clothes upon it, and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread out their clothes on the road while others spread branches cut from the fields. ⁹ Those in front of him and those following were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord!^[a] ¹⁰ Blessings on the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest!” ¹¹ Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. After he looked around at everything, because it was already late in the evening, he returned to Bethany with the Twelve.

I have never been a fan of parades. My family and friends can tell you I don't go out of my way to see them. On Thanksgiving or New Year's Day when folks are gathered around the TV, drinking coffee, talking, laughing, and watching the cast of Hamilton sing and dance in front of Macy's, I am likely to be outside working in the garage or cooking in the kitchen.

The reality is that there is no such thing as a parade that isn't political. 4th of July, Gay Pride, Macy's...they all have a point of view. But, perhaps what turns me off about them most is that for much of human history parades were opportunities for the conquering army to display their power, might, and authority. In the British Museum there are Mesopotamian boundary stones from the 6th century BC that show the conquering army's parades. The Romans borrowed heavily from these traditions and whenever the ruling governor entered a town, he came on a white stallion accompanied by a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. It was a demonstration of imperial power and Roman theology, designed to dissuade any revolutionaries from terrorist activity.

In their book *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write about these Roman parades as a backdrop for the story of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem.¹

Pilate didn't live in Jerusalem, he considered it a sort of back water town, insular, provincial, and even hostile. He preferred Caesarea Maritima, which means 'by the sea.' Built by Herod the Great, it was a beautiful Mediterranean harbor city about 60 miles to the west. You can still go there today and see the archeological remains of the grand promenade, an aqueduct, and a Roman theater that could seat thousands of people. For Pilate, it must have been a bit like leaving Evanston for Joliet.

But the governor and his predecessors knew that during the religious festivals of the Judeans they were best advised to march into Jerusalem and reinforce the small garrison there. The parade was a way of showing the native people that Rome was always watching, always in control. Someone has said that military parades say more about those who organize them than those who march in them, and certainly that was the case for Pilate and his elite guard.

So, at the Passover and other festivals, Pilate left the comfort of his seaside resort and marched into Jerusalem to make sure that the heathens there didn't get out of control.

On the opposite side of town, east of the walled city, Jesus stood on the Mount of Olives and surveyed Jerusalem, just as we did on our pilgrimage a couple of weeks ago. The view from there is impressive today and it must have been equally impressive during Jesus' time. The high hill or mount was covered with the olive trees that give it its name. Out in front of Jesus and his disciples would have spread the walls of the city and Solomon's Temple, the center of Judea's religious and cultic life.

Jesus, not shying away from the political significance of his entrance to the city, makes his preparations to enter the town. His is a very different message that he is attempting to convey. Instead of a stallion, Jesus chooses a colt, unriden. Instead of a column of Roman soldiers following their leader, Jesus is greeted by crowds who lay garments and leafy branches on the road ahead of him. Instead of fear, Jesus is greeted by a pleading request: *Hosanna* (save us), they cry out. Save us from poverty, from fear, from death. Save us from Roman oppression...become our King, our leader, our Lord.

¹ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, Harper San Francisco, 2006, pp. 2-10

For Pilate, the trip to Jerusalem is an obligation of oppression. For Jesus, the trip is the culmination of his ministry and his mission, to proclaim a realm of God that isn't dependent upon a show of force, but instead is dependent on the love of one's neighbor.

George Orwell was writing in 1941, at a time when Britons faced the prospect of defeat and conquest by the Nazis. He decried the fascist "goose-step" as "one of the most horrible sights in the world," and saw in it "an affirmation of naked power; contained in it, quite consciously and intentionally, is the vision of a boot crashing down on a face. Its ugliness is part of its essence, for what it is saying is 'Yes, I *am* ugly, and you daren't laugh at me,' like the bully who makes faces at his victim." Orwell said, "A military parade is really a kind of ritual dance, something like a ballet, expressing a certain philosophy of life,"²

As a confrontation to this way of life, Jesus parades into the Holy City of Jerusalem with a different philosophy of life. His ballet is not a goose-step, a tank, or a missile, but instead it is an open challenge to that vision of state sponsored violence that is exemplified by Pilate's parade on the other side of town. Every time we execute a death row prisoner or drop a bomb on a suspected terrorist who surrounds himself in a village of children and euphemistically call their deaths collateral damage; every time we give unfettered access to weapons of mass murder; every time our nation gives military support to countries that oppress their own people, we are joining Pilate's parade.

But across town, Jesus is staging his own demonstration. And those of us who are moved by his vision, his dance of faith -- we are called to give the very coats on our back, to lay them in his path and to pronounce that he is the one whom we will follow. His vision is ours.

As the events of Holy Week teach us, this proclamation can be costly indeed. Jesus wasn't killed because his vision was passive and not challenging to the status quo. He was killed because he threatened the very foundations of his world with a different vision, a vision he called the realm of God. And we are called to follow this parade, this vision. We are called to the side of town that looks more like the south side or Joliet. We are called to stand in the breach where communities are still crying out...save us, save us, save us.

² George Orwell, The English Reader: What Every Literate Person Needs to Know, ed. Diane and Michael Ravitch, Oxford Press, 2006, p. 453.

*Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown, will you let my name be known
Will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?³*

³John Bell, *The Summons*, The Faith We Sing, Abington Press, 2000, #2120.