

I Love a Parade
Mark 11:1-11
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I

This past December, which seems like it was so much more than four months ago, my family gathered in front of City Hall just across the street there to watch the annual Athens Holiday Parade of Lights. If you've never been, it's a fabulous community holiday tradition. We loved seeing all the different marching bands and vehicles decorated with Christmas lights and the wide variety of groups from all across Northeast Georgia who came together to celebrate.

It was a long parade, with probably close to 100 different entries. But of course, we had to stay until the very end, because the biggest, grandest float in the parade came at the end – and riding high up on the biggest float, presiding over the entirety of the festivities, were Mr. and Mrs. Claus.

II

Parades are a particular kind of community theater, aren't they? There are of course no parades or public gatherings right now, but some day, they will be back, for parades are a way in which we make meaning together, a way in which we honor heroes, a way in which we come together to celebrate and mark important occasions.

And of course, the modes of transportation we select for parades are a key part of that meaning-making, a key part of that community theater. It would be a faux pas for the homecoming queen to ride in a parade in anything other than a convertible. It would be anticlimactic if Mr. and Mrs. Claus did not ride at the end of the parade of lights in the biggest and grandest float. Throughout all times and all cultures, parades are a way in which we human beings have come together as a community to make meaning together.

III

The Roman Empire used parades to great effect. To this very day, you can go to Rome, and just outside the Coliseum is a monument called Trajan's column, which depicts what a Roman victory parade looked like. There are the soldiers, marching with military precision, swords and spears and shields and breastplates glinting in the sun. There are the flag bearers, carrying proudly the insignias of the unit and the Empire. And there, in chains, are the slaves, the enemy soldiers who were taken prisoner in the

battle, being whipped and prodded along as they struggle, on display as the spoils of war. And then, at the end of the parade, riding a chariot pulled by the finest horse in the land, comes the conquering hero. The Roman Empire knew how to stage a parade that left no doubt about who was in charge and in power in the land.

In the early years of the first century, a man named Pontius Pilate was appointed as the Roman governor over a broad swath of land we have come to know now as Israel and the West Bank, although the boundaries were slightly different then. Roman governors, wherever they happened to be stationed, had two basic standing orders from Rome – keep the tax revenue rolling in, and keep the peace, by whatever means necessary.

Pilate's home and headquarters were not in Jerusalem. Most of the time, Pilate kept to the comfort of his home and headquarters in Caesarea Maritima, a proper Roman city built on the Mediterranean coast, where Pilate's palace looked out over the sea.

But every year, the Jews gathered in Jerusalem to mark a holy day they called the Passover – in which they claimed that once they were slaves in Egypt, but their God delivered them from their slavery and brought them through the waters of the Red Sea, and they claimed that their God threw the Egyptian king and his army and chariots into the sea. It was not a story that Rome took lightly, and so every year, Pilate was forced to travel into the Judean highlands to Jerusalem to ensure that security remained tight.

I imagine that whenever Pilate traveled away from his headquarters at Caesarea Maritima, he traveled as a proper Roman governor – banners and insignia unfurled, a contingent of soldiers in full battle uniform, and Pilate himself in his chariot, pulled by the finest horse in the land. He took the most direct route into Jerusalem approaching the city walls from the west.

But on the other side of the city, approaching from the east, came another parade. So listen now for a Word from God from Mark 11:1-11.

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” Then he 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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

What an odd parade this is! No soldiers. No weapons. No slaves. No banners.

And some conquering hero! He’s not riding in a chariot – he’s not even riding a fine horse. He’s riding a colt that had never been ridden before. I know what young horses do the first time they’re ridden – the buck and kick and bray and put up all kinds of fuss.

So here comes this parade, making its way down from the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley, approaching Jerusalem from the east – on a collision course with Pilate and the Romans coming from the west. This parade has no weapons or banners – just old people throwing coats on the road and children waving leafy branches in the air and shouting “Hosanna!” which means, literally, “Save us now!”

The conquering hero of this parade looks like he can barely save himself from being bucked off of the colt he’s riding, much less anybody else. The whole thing seems like some kind of farce. And I think, my friends, that that is precisely the point. The whole world is expecting a violent collision between two prize fighters – and instead, the whole thing is going to be a slaughter. Jesus will be betrayed by one of his closest and oldest friends. He will be arrested, and when the chips are down, he won’t even draw a sword or throw a punch, and those that try to on his behalf, he will chastise. He will be beaten. He will be mocked. He will be crucified. He will die, and he won’t even get a proper funeral. Before the most powerful empire the world has ever known, Jesus of Nazareth will willingly surrender, and become completely and utterly powerless.

IV

And so here we are, my friend, at the start of the most unusual Holy Week of our lifetimes.

And I don’t know about you, but I’m shouting “Save us now!” on this Palm Sunday. I’m fighting mad at this virus. I’m fighting mad at those who *still* won’t take this public safety threat seriously. I’m fighting mad at the elected leaders in our nation who, at least in my judgment, have failed at the first responsibility of any leader at any level – to protect and defend the people whom you lead. I’m don’t know about you, my friend, but I’m fighting mad this morning.

And instead I come to this Palm Sunday and find this ridiculous rabbi riding this pitiful bucking colt into Jerusalem – surrounded not by weapons and warriors, but by

children and old people waving palm branches. I come to this Palm Sunday and find the Messiah being led like a sheep to the slaughter, surrendering without a fight.

Surrendering without a fight.

There's an old story about a boxer who had a record of zero victories and 56 defeats by knockout. 56 times, he had climbed in the ring, ready to fight, certain that this would be his night, and 56 times, it had all ended the same way – in resounding defeat by knockout.

On the eve of his 57th fight, an old man appeared out of the shadows and said, "Hey kid, I know how you can not get KO'd tonight."

At first the boxer was skeptical, but after 56 knockouts, he was ready to try anything, so he said, "OK, what's the secret."

"Do exactly as I say and I guarantee that you won't get KO'd, but you have to follow my advice exactly."

"OK," said the boxer. "I'm ready to do whatever it takes to not get knocked out anymore. What's the secret."

The old man leaned in and whispered – "The secret to not getting out is this – don't put on the gloves and don't get in the ring, and you won't get knocked out."

The paradox of the cross is that the path to victory is through surrender. The paradox of the cross is that every year, the journey of Holy Week that begins on this Palm Sunday always goes through Good Friday before it gets to Easter Sunday.

I've found myself angry in recent days. I've been grieving the things in my life that this pandemic has already taken away from me, and I'm fearful of what else it might take before it's over. I like to think of myself as a man who has a great deal of power and agency in my life, and by many measures, I still do. But I am finding myself itching for a fight. I am still finding myself wanting to put on the gloves and climb in the ring.

Perhaps Jesus is inviting you and me to consider another path – instead of gearing ourselves up for a violent collision, to instead surrender our will and the care of our lives over to the will of the God who loves us so much that he'd rather go to the cross for us than be without us.

That doesn't mean that we should be fatalistic and go around licking doorknobs, or that we shouldn't be in fervent prayer that a cure is found with all available speed. But it does mean letting go of so many things that are truly beyond our control. It does mean praying the serenity prayer over and over and over again – "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

We cannot control what happens in the White House, or in the Governor's Mansion, or in the Centers for Disease Control. We cannot control when this pandemic will end, or what the economic fallout may be. We cannot control when life will "get back to normal." But we can control what happens in our houses. We can control ourselves and our attitudes. We can control whether or not we're willing to surrender ourselves and the care of our lives completely over to the God who was and who is and who is to come, the God made known to us in the life, death, and resurrection of this rabbi who comes this day riding into the fight of his life on a bucking, braying colt.

V

As we enter this most unusual Holy Week, there is still much work for us to do as a church – dispersed though we may be.

Where there is hatred, we have been deployed to sow love

Where there is injury, we have been deployed to sow healing

Where there is doubt, we have been deployed to sow faith

Where there is despair, we have been deployed to sow hope

Where there is darkness, we have been deployed to sow light

Palm Sunday is a paradox, to be sure. For we who shout Hosanna on this Sunday may be the very same people who shout Crucify him on Friday.

But the paradox of this also reminds us that it is in giving that we receive.

it is in self-emptying that we are filled.

it is in forgiving that we are forgiven.

It is in surrendering that we find peace.

At it is in dying that we, too, are raised to eternal life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.