

“Everyone Loves a Parade”

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April 14, 2019

Psalm 118

¹O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! ²Let Israel say, “His steadfast love endures forever.”

¹⁹Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. ²⁰This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it. ²¹I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. ²²The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. ²³This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. ²⁴This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. ²⁵Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success! ²⁶Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. ²⁷The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. ²⁸You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. ²⁹O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Luke 19:28-40

²⁸After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” ³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ³⁴They said, “The Lord needs it.” ³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” ³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” ⁴⁰He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Everyone loves a parade! In the rural area of West Tennessee where I grew up, we had Christmas parades – one in every little town around – and Homecoming parades – both for the local school system and the local college, and a 4th of July parade. We also had parades for the neighboring towns’ festivals – the Paris *Fish Fry*, the Humboldt *Strawberry Festival*, and the Gleason *Tater Town Special*. Parades are a lot of fun and they are big shows. The grand marshal waves from a car, often a convertible even if they are freezing in those Christmas parades, and every fire truck in the area drives along, with sirens wailing and lights flashing. Elaborate floats from many different organizations take part, and then there are the bands, marching in step and playing their well-practiced songs. At the end of the procession come the horses, and it’s for a very practical reason that the horses come last – I marched with the band in many parades, and I definitely wouldn’t want to march behind the horses, due to their, um, *exhaust*. These elaborate parades were indeed much fun, and they are *nothing* compared to the spectacles put on in New York for Thanksgiving or in California for the Rose Bowl. But these big spectacles are so very different from perhaps the best parade there has been. And it’s really those relegated-to-last horses that connect us to the parade we read about today.

The parade Jesus was in was *not* such a big spectacle. There were no fire trucks, no decorated floats, no marching bands. No, this was not like our parades, but it was indeed a big deal. We call this parade “The Triumphal Entry” and it *was* that, though it didn’t have any convertibles and the grand marshal rode in on a colt. The event starts with this interesting scene where Jesus tells two disciples to go into the village ahead and untie a colt that had never been ridden. Jesus instructs them to just say that the Lord needs it and the owners will let the disciples take it. Then, perhaps surprisingly, it works! We aren’t told whether Jesus set this up in advance or whether simply hearing that the Lord needed it was sufficient. Either explanation works, really,

but I'm somewhat more fascinated by the second explanation. As Rev. John Fairless writes, "Oh, that we might be so flexible in turning loose of our possessions when it becomes obvious that 'the Lord needs it!'" In this case, the owners let the colt go and Jesus began his journey into Jerusalem.

It's worth noting here, though, that Luke only tells us that the people spread their cloaks on the road. No mention here of palm branches, so you might wonder why we had our own little parade this morning waving palm branches. I suppose I could have asked you to throw your coats down as you walked in, but with the back and forth weather we've been having, you might need them. My New Testament professor in seminary, Dr. Mitzi Minor, gave us a commandment: "Thou shall not harmonize the gospels." Each gospel writer has their own purposes in mind in how they tell the story, and we should listen to each telling the story their own way. However, when we find no palm branches in the story on *Palm* Sunday, I think it makes sense to look to the other gospels. In John's Gospel, we are told specifically of the people waving palm branches and Matthew and Mark tell us of people spreading leafy branches on the road. So, it's pretty likely that there were branches, as well as cloaks, but our commemoration of the event goes much better with the palm branches, so you can keep your coats.

Whether it was cloaks or branches, though, is less important than what the people did. Luke tells us that "the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen." Though Jesus was greeted joyfully on this day, it would only be a few days later that he would be condemned to death. How can such a turnaround happen so quickly? In part, it's because Jesus would not be the kind of Messiah the people wanted Him to be. Jesus does not fit their preconceived notions. This one who is greeted and praised on this day would soon die on a cross, not overthrow the Roman government. This long-awaited Messiah would not come in might with armies of angels, but instead would come in

humility, riding on a colt. Soon, this Jesus would ask God's forgiveness for the very people who would put Him to death. What could this crowd make of such a Messiah? What do *we* make of such a Messiah? In many ways, our world is not all that different from their world. Power and wealth are still what gets our attention. Elaborate parades and other spectacles are what we pay attention to. Our God, though, is found in the humble, in the wonderful but ordinary things of our lives. God will be found in the lowly and meek, rather than in the glamorous and ostentatious.

Rev. Jill Duffield, editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, writes: "This year, Palm Sunday feels more like a protest march than a triumphant parade, a witness to the courage of the crowds to worship the One who knows their worth right in front of those who want to keep them quiet, a prescient display of the relentless rule of God that destroys death, refuses to be silenced, raises up the least, recovers the lost and saves sinners." When Christians seek to align themselves with the rich and powerful – as Christians have done at least since Emperor Constantine – instead of with the least and the lost, we lose sight of the mission of Jesus. When we stand with Jesus in the midst of the humble, we will find ourselves in more parades of palm branches than in penthouses of the powerful.

This lowly parade of Jesus stands in deep contrast to the parade of Pontius Pilate, likely occurring at about the same time. Pilate came to town during the Passover observance, showing his power and military might. Imperial cavalry and soldiers, royal robes, clinking armor, glinting swords, beating drums. Pilate's parade showed the Jews who was in charge around there, and it surely wasn't – no, it couldn't be – this lowly carpenter riding a colt into town.

Yet it was, and it *is*. Jesus would soon tell Pilate that His kingdom is not of this world. The mission of Jesus is not about conventional power, it is about self-sacrificing power. Our Lord came in humility, not in a show of wordly might. He could have entered Jerusalem on a mighty stallion,

but that was not who Jesus came to be. As Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, Jesus, “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.”

This parade has no fancy cars, no flashing lights, no candy thrown at children. It’s a parade where we are invited to join with Jesus marching with those who recognize that worldly power is fleeting, that only the love of God will last. We are to look to Jesus and follow where He leads.

Many try to co-opt Jesus to fit their own points of view. Let me give you a list of some book titles you can find for sale: *Jesus, CEO; Jesus, Entrepreneur; Jesus, MD; Jesus, Life Coach; Jesus, the Greatest Therapist who Ever Lived; Jesus in Blue Jeans; The Yoga of Jesus; The Politics of Jesus*. I haven’t read any of those books, and I’m sure they contain some good insights, but it just seems like they are trying to mold Jesus into the kind of savior they want him to be. Jesus is an entrepreneur, or He’s a doctor, or a life coach, or a therapist, or into yoga. Some people are certain that Jesus is a Republican, while others are just as certain that He is a Democrat. He might really be more of an anarchist. We try to make Jesus into something He isn’t, something other than what He came to be, instead of following the humble Rabbi on a colt. So let’s turn our eyes from the rich and the powerful of this world, and the ones who invoke Christianity as a political ploy, and instead focus on following Jesus. And following Jesus this week leads to a cross. Jesus told us “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” The parade of palm branches leads to the *Via Dolorosa* - the path Jesus walked on the way to his crucifixion.

Everyone loves a parade, so let's join the band of disciples as we follow Jesus where He leads. Amen.