

Wesley United Methodist Church
Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
April 9, 2017 - Palm Sunday
Text: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
Matthew 21:1-11
Title: More Than a Parade

If you had been in Jerusalem that day, what would you have seen? What would you have heard? You might have seen men on horses, soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles. You might have heard the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles and the beating of drums. The crowd, however, would likely have been eerily silent.ⁱ

This doesn't sound at all like the procession into Jerusalem that we heard described in Matthew's gospel. It doesn't fit with any of the images that we have of Jesus's triumphant entry into Jerusalem on that day that we have come to call Palm Sunday. This doesn't describe Jesus's entrance into Jerusalem at all. However, there was something else happening in Jerusalem that day.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in their book The Last Week – A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem describe something else that was happening. Adam Hamilton in his book The Way, Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus also describes something else happening in Jerusalem that day and I'll be referring to and using some of what they wrote.

There was another parade or procession – maybe even two others that day. Jesus entered the city from the East from the Mount of Olives, from Bethany and Bethphage. On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate the Roman governor also entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. It is quite possible that

King Herod Antipas may also have entered from the north with his royal soldiers. Pontius Pilate and King Herod Antipas both knew how to use violence to suppress the people. King Herod Antipas was the one who had beheaded John the Baptist.

Adam Hamilton writes: Two of the three rulers entering Jerusalem in parades on that Palm Sunday were iron-fisted men known for their cruelty. They were perfectly willing to kill in order to hold power, and they used impressive shows of force to demonstrate that fact.”ⁱⁱ Jesus, on the other hand, had no soldiers. He led a ragtag band of followers, who according to three of the Gospels waved palm branches as he passed by on a donkey and three of the Gospels describe people waving their cloaks at him or putting them on the ground in the customary way of welcoming a famous person. There was quite a contrast between the three groups entering the city on that day.

There are Biblical Scholars who identify Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem as a planned political demonstration. Now I know that doesn’t sit well with many of us, but I invite us to think about some of the symbolism of that day – things that people in First Century Jerusalem would have easily recognized, but that are not so clear to us.

Pilate and King Herod came into Jerusalem riding on great steeds, large horses as we would expect a military leader to do. Jesus came riding on a donkey – one that had never been ridden. To the people who lined the streets this would have been a clear fulfillment of the prophet Zechariah. Zechariah foretold a time when “The Lord will have his day. And when it comes, everything that was ever taken from Jerusalem will be returned and divided among its people.” (14:1) “He will take his stand on the Mount of Olives east of Jerusalem.” (14:4a). This is the path that Jesus

used when he entered Jerusalem. Zechariah also wrote, “Everyone in Jerusalem, celebrate and shout! Your king has won a victory, and he is coming to you. He is humble and rides on a donkey; he comes on the colt of a donkey.” (9:9) and goes on to describe “I will bring peace to nations, and your king will rule from sea to sea.” (9:10.)

The Jews gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover knew these scriptures. They knew these prophecies. Is there any wonder that the crowd became excited when Jesus appeared!

By the way, Jesus did not need to ride an animal to get from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem. It was a very short trip – one that he had walked before. There is no other place in the Gospels where we hear of Jesus requesting an animal to ride. He always walked. He had just come from Galilee, a walk of ninety miles. He certainly did not need to ride a donkey for that last leg of the trip – less than two miles in distance, but a million miles in significance.

The donkey was also symbolic because King David rode a donkey. The terrain of Palestine was rocky and hilly and donkeys were able to handle that terrain much better than horses and in this mostly dry terrain they were able to travel farther on less water.

David also rode the donkey because it was considered a humble beast, and reflected his identity as a shepherd king. The kings of Israel from that time on rode donkeys or mules to identify with David. So here, Jesus is also being identified with King David and is heralded by the crowd as the king who would come to save them.

If we'd been there that day, we might have thought, just as the crowd did, that this was it. Jesus was giving a clear signal that he was the long-

awaited King promised by the prophets. Finally, Jesus was openly proclaiming he was the Messiah!ⁱⁱⁱ

The crowd welcomed Jesus shouting, the words from Psalm 118, that we heard earlier, words they would have” known by heart since childhood since it was recited every year at the Feast of Tabernacles and during the Feast of Passover. The psalm was written to welcome kings back to Jerusalem as they returned victorious from war. It was also understood to refer to the Messiah who would come and deliver the people. The people were hailing Jesus as their King, and this was his royal procession.”^{iv}

We know from our scripture that Jesus had told his disciples that he would face death. They didn’t really believe him; they didn’t really understand what he was telling them, but he knew as he entered Jerusalem that day that he was setting into motion the final chapter of his earthly life. The Mount of Olives is where later in the week Jesus will gather with his disciples and be in prayer. It is where he will pray, “If it is possible let this cup pass from me. But not my will, but yours be done.” (Luke 22:41).

The Mount of Olives overlooks the city of Jerusalem. From here you can see the location of almost every event of the last week of Jesus’ life. The side of the Mount of Olives is covered in tombs. That route takes one from a high place down into a valley – the Valley of Kidron – a place of burial – and then up the hills again into the city of Jerusalem. As I think about that, about traveling down the side of the Mount of Olives, through the valley of Kidron, the place of burial, I think of the words of the 23rd Psalm, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, your rod and your staff comfort me.” I wonder if Jesus thought about those words during that short journey. I imagine that he might have.

The Psalms were Jesus's prayer book and he knew them well. Even his words on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" are the opening words that we know as Psalm 22, and his final words, "Into your hand, I commend my spirit" are from Psalm 31.

Borg and Crossan write that "Jesus' procession deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city." Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory, and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus' procession" presented "an alternative vision, the kingdom of God. ... The confrontation between these two kingdoms continues through the last week of Jesus' life." As we all know, the week ends with Jesus being executed by the powers who ruled his world. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is about a different kind of power and a different kind of kingdom. His entry was for a "king and kingdom built upon a radical desire to love God and a commitment to love one's enemies."^v

The Romans would have understood the symbolism. That's why Pilate was in Jerusalem. He was there to maintain the order; to be ready to put down any uprising that might take place. He knew that Passover was a volatile time in Jerusalem. It was a time that celebrated the Hebrew people escaping from slavery in Egypt. It was a time when emotions were high and when people might be expected to stir up a riot or a plot to try to break free from Roman oppression. There were likely about 2 and a half million people in Jerusalem for Passover – a huge increase over the normal population. Pilate and his soldiers were there to be ready in case there was trouble and often there was.

Borg and Crossan tell us that Pilate's procession was not only a display of imperial power, but it was also a display of Roman imperial theology. "According to this theology, the emperor was not simply the **ruler**

of Rome, but the **Son of God**. It began with the greatest of the emperors, Augustus” who had ruled Rome when Jesus was born. Inscriptions refer to him as “Son of God,” “lord” and “savior” and one who had brought “peace on earth”. It continued with his son Tiberius who was emperor during the time of Jesus’ public activity. Augustus may have brought peace on earth but it was a peace controlled by power, oppression, and threat; very different than the kind of peace that Jesus proclaimed.

Make no mistake; Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on that day was dangerous. The Romans would definitely understand the symbolism of what was happening.

As the week progressed, Jesus would overturn the tables of the money changers in the temple. He would tell many parables about what was going to happen. He would spend time in Jerusalem and the religious authorities would become even more angry with him. Judas would agree to betray Jesus; Jesus would eat his last meal with the disciples. He would face a trial the outcome of which was predetermined. The crowd that on Sunday cheered for him and hailed him as Messiah would later yell, “Crucify him”.

It is amazing, isn’t it, how quickly a crowd can change its mind. It’s hard for us to understand how the crowd could turn on him so quickly. But before we are quick to condemn the crowd, it might be good for us to examine our own lives and to be honest about the times when we have cheered for Jesus and the times when we have betrayed or denied him.

We may not do so as dramatically as the crowd, but I suspect that most of us have done so from time to time in our lives. Are there times when we have been ashamed to admit to others that we are followers of Jesus? Are there times when we are willing to identify Jesus as a great

moral teacher, but not acknowledge him as the Son of God, the Lord of our Lives?

Probably the way we deny Jesus the most is when we live our lives in ways that do not reflect our faith in ways that are hypocritical; when our words say one thing but our actions say something else. We know that Jesus tells us to love others – not just those we choose, but all people. We know that Jesus tells us that whatever we do for or to the person we think the least of we do to Jesus. We are to treat each person as if that person were Jesus. As we go through our lives do we use our faith to help us make both those important decisions that we think are going to be life-changing, as well as those day to day decisions that we make almost automatically? When we engage in political conversations, and decide how to vote, do we weigh our decisions against the standard of what Jesus teaches?

There are so many ways that we can deny Jesus without even thinking about it. Before we judge the crowd that turned against Jesus, we would do well to examine our lives in a spirit of truthfulness.

The good news is that even Peter, one of Jesus' closest disciples, denied Jesus the night before he was crucified – not once, or twice, but three times in one night. The really good news is that Jesus did not turn his back on Peter and reject him. After Jesus' resurrection, Mark's gospel tells us that the women who came to the tomb were told to go tell the disciples "and Peter" that he was alive. Jesus does not reject us when we deny him, but gently continues to invite us back and continues to love us and call us to be all that we are able to be with Jesus' help.

At least two processions entered Jerusalem on that day. Today the same question faces us. Which procession are we in? Which procession

do we want to be in? As the week unfolds, who will we be following?
These are the questions of Palm Sunday, of the week that is coming, of
Easter and of every day for the rest of our lives.

ⁱ Borg, Marcus and Crossan, John Dominic, The Last Week – A Day-by-Day aCcount of Jesus’s Final Week in Jerusalem.

ⁱⁱ Hamilton, Adam, The Way, Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2012, p.139

ⁱⁱⁱ Hamilton, p.138

^{iv} Hamilton, p.138

^v Hamilton, p.143