

Sermon  
Madison Christian Community  
Palm Sunday, March 20, 2016  
Rev. Sonja L. Ingebritsen

### **Pick Your Parade**

May the words spoken, and the words received, be only in your service,  
great God of Love. Amen.

Imagine the excitement in the air! The parade is coming to town!  
Folks are holding the Ancient Near East equivalent of balloons, and eating the  
equivalent of hotdogs, ketchup dripping down the front of their tunics. Murmurs,  
commotion, the chaos of finding friends amid the crowd of thousands and a place  
to stand where the parade route will be in view. Young children sitting on their  
parents' shoulders to see over the crowd. Banners strung across the road, and  
parade goers holding signs that read: "Hail the Son of God!" and "Messiah" and  
" Savior."

"Do you see anything yet?" the people in back ask of the people standing  
nearest the road.

And finally, finally, the clip clop of hooves.

"Hooray!!!" the crowd yells. They begin to chant: "Long live . . . Caesar!"

Wait. What??

Jesus enters Jerusalem on the *other* side of town in a very different kind of

parade.

We Christians can be forgiven for not knowing that two parades occur in Jerusalem that day, the beginning of the week preparing for the Jewish festival of Passover. It's not mentioned in our Gospels. We only know of it from other ancient sources. The presence of the imperial guard was a painful reality to the original hearers and readers of the Gospels. In fact, by the time the Gospels were written, the Romans had already sacked the Temple to quash a Jewish revolt, and the Jewish Diaspora had begun. Those who had been part of the palm parade and those who came after them knew that the palm parade was a calculated act of political resistance. And the Gospel writers confirm that the protest was orchestrated by Jesus.

You see, the parade celebrating Caesar was a show of imperial power, a not so subtle warning to the masses that gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover festival to be mindful of their place and keep out of trouble. Remember, Jerusalem was occupied territory. For years it had been ruled by the Roman Empire, and was controlled by Caesar through his minions. Men like Herod and Pontius Pilate.

The strategy the Romans implemented throughout the empire to hedge their bets against open rebellion was to allow local religions to continue to practice . . . That is, so long as they made sure tributes and taxes were paid and their people stayed in line.

Jesus wasn't staying in line that day in Jerusalem. He and those with him were staging an "in-your-face-Caesar" protest. He was inciting revolt. It was an act of sedition that led to his execution later that week.

Jesus' revolt, though, to the surprise and even disappointment of some of his followers, and the confusion of those in power, didn't rely on armies and weapons. Instead, his revolutionary act was announcing the Kingdom of God, proclaiming that none but God was God, and that God alone—not Caesar and not Jewish lawmakers—deserved our ultimate allegiance.

This was radical and dangerous talk. It was the kind of revolt led to the empowerment of colonized minds, bodies, and spirits. It was the kind of revolt that told peasants and outcasts that they could take agency because, unlike the lie they had been told by the principalities and powers, they were human beings of worth, created in the image of and beloved by God.

Jesus' revolt came in the form of his insistence that God's desire was for justice on behalf of the poor, imprisoned, and socially stigmatized. He drew from the prophets, reminding his followers that this always had been God's desire, and always would be.

Yes, Jerusalem was abuzz that parade Sunday. Thousands of pilgrims were milling about the city. Surely all kinds of people would have stumbled onto either parade by sheer happenstance, or maybe rumor. But what about those who choose

one parade over another?

Who lines the streets for Pilate's parade, cheering on the impressive equestrian guard of the empire as they process grandly down the street? Surely there were many Romans citizens. And Roman cronies and officials from all levels of government would wave their national flags along the parade route. But we can also assume that there are also Jews in the crowd, and Jewish officials in particular. Some may be swept up by the dramatic show, not thinking of the implications. But perhaps some attend in order to ingratiate themselves, so as to retain their places power within the colonial structure, limited as that is. Perhaps others play the game they feel they need to play in order to keep their religious community safe from any disapproving nod from Caesar. Still others may be there out of fear. Appearance of non-allegiance would be playing with fire, especially since most Jews, including Jesus, were excluded from the rights and protections of citizenship and judicial process.

So, who chooses to participate in the palm parade? Who throws their cloaks on the ground in welcome of Jesus? Who has the audacity to hail Jesus, not Caesar, as God's Son, their messiah and savior? Here's who I imagine:

Look at the parade route! It's packed with the women whom Jesus welcomed into partnership in ministry—the sisters, Mary and Martha; Mary Magdalene; Mary his mother, and so many others whose names we'll never know.

And see, there's that woman from Samaria, from whom Jesus took water from at the well, and even the Syrophenician woman who schooled Jesus about who was worthy of being invited to the table.

Look, there are the lepers, happy to throw their garments on the road, if only to show off their beautifully healed skin. There's the man from Damascus, who sees Jesus riding on the donkey with his new eyesight. That frenzied swarm over there are those whom Jesus freed from demons. And Zaccheus. Dear Zaccheus. Still too short to see over the heads of those in front of him, but no longer the swill of a tax collector that he once was. He's handing out water to those in the hot sun and not charging a denari.

I see some Jewish lawmakers among the crowd, don't you? Not well disguised. Curious? Or here to take names? Like I said, following the way of Jesus is dangerous. Yet, listen. Those who experienced the in-breaking of God's realm through Jesus can't help but let their hosannas ring!

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At the beginning of worship today, we were the crowd of protesters. With our own hail and hosanna, we marched in the light of God with our protest signs and palm fronds from one sanctuary to the other, declaring that we shall not be moved.

How might the story open up for you in new ways to see Jesus as one who

planned calculated acts of political resistance? The reality is that practicing our faith, however we describe it, has political consequence of one kind or another. What we choose to say or not to say, what we choose to do or not to do . . . everything . . . either affirms society's status quo or speaks a word of transformation. In his book about Christian religious education, Thomas H. Groome contends that whatever we teach explicitly . . . or implicitly . . . about God and the Christian story is neither a "private nor nonpolitical enterprise."<sup>1</sup>

For some of us, our mini march this morning was invigorating. It can be exciting to be a part of in-your-face-Caesar moments. For others, the noise and chaos may have been confusing and disruptive. Both reactions were likely to have been present at Jesus' parade, too.

But whether we like the pulsing energy of a protest march or prefer quieter acts of discipleship, we are *all* called to participate, as Brazilian educator Paulo Freire names it, in "this radical demand for the objective transformation of reality"<sup>2</sup> so that the humanity of both the oppressed *and* the oppressor can be restored.

What's at stake for one is at stake for all of us, even the planet. We are not called simply to make protest signs, but to stand on the side of God's desire for right relationship between and among all of creation. We can't stop at chants or

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1980), p 15.

<sup>2</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* ((NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1970, 1993), 2000 edition, p 50.

even charity. We must be prepared to enact justice—the justice God declares—in solidarity with those who are disenfranchised, colonized, or disempowered.

As in Jesus' time, still today these radical acts of justice-making are dangerous. Speaking words of rebuke to imperial power and working on behalf of a new status quo means turning down the invitation to Caesar's parade, and going instead to the parade for the one whose acts of rebellion led to the cross.

Whose invitation will we accept?

Perhaps our palm branches need to come with warning labels. "Danger! If you decide to march with Jesus, be prepared for the cost. Be prepared to be transformed into deeper humanity. Be prepared to know that your life is inextricably bound to the life of every other. Be aware that such knowledge will compel you to engage in radical, life-affirming, community building, liberating activity on behalf of the Beloved Community, even when that activity engenders negative consequences to your personal interests. Repeat: Pick up palm branches at your own risk!"

But here's what we need to weigh if we shy away from the palm fronds: What is the risk to ourselves and others to play it safe, if by playing it safe we lose a part of our humanity by refusing to participate in the kind of relationships that make us—all of us together—most fully alive?