

The Two Parades
Palm Sunday, 2009
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:
Micah 3:1-2, 9-10
Mark 11:1-10

Don't you just love the pageantry and tradition of Palm Sunday?

It's impossible not to be uplifted by the sight of the palm fronds waving and the spectacle of the parade. Perhaps some of us have participated as children – or even adults – in a reenactment of what scripture calls “the triumphal entry” in the Holy City of Jerusalem,

In Mark's version, as we read a moment ago:

“Many people spread their cloaks on the road and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields” as Christ made his entry on a donkey that had never been ridden.

The scene appears in all four gospel accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. It makes for a great vision, a memorable image. But there is a lot more than meets the eye.

Biblical scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan explain that Jesus' triumphal entry may not have been the only parade that day.¹

Jesus and the disciples were coming to Jerusalem, after all, for Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year. The population of the City of David multiplied two-to three-fold each year for this high festival as believers from across the region came to worship.

So, the Romans knew that a show of force was needed – not only to protect Pontius Pilate as he made his own entry to reinforce his secular power, but to show the Jews that any protest or demonstration would be met with overwhelming military force. So, in they came, Borg and Crossan write, a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers.

¹ The Final Week: What the Gospels Really Teach us About Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem., 2006

Can you picture *that* procession?

Maybe it looked like an earlier version of the kind of Cold War military parades the Soviet Union used to stage in Moscow. Remember those? Stiff-legged soldiers in cadence, rumbling tanks and trucks pulling nuclear missiles, each polished to shine in the sun.

Perhaps a more modern image comes to mind, like those we saw on the news this week of London police arrayed in force against the demonstrators at the summit of the world's leaders.

I caught a close up look at such a spectacle in 2000 when I was in Los Angeles for the Democratic National Convention. As I walked out of the hotel to stroll the few blocks to the Staples Center for an evening session, a phalanx of Los Angeles police appeared out of nowhere – eight officers across, 20 rows deep, helmets on, visors down, billy clubs in one hand and riot shields in the other, jogging in step as a solid column down the middle of the street.

Their unspoken message for political protestors that day in Los Angeles was the same one as the Romans were sending in 30 a.d. in Jerusalem: “Don’t get any ideas – if you know what’s good for you.”

So, as Jesus was coming in from the east from the Mount of Olives, riding on an ass in a traditional show of peace, followed and hailed by peasants, Pilate and his forces were coming in from the west to remind the city who was really in charge.

It’s a powerful and plausible scenario that these two scholars offer, one that sets the stage for a week when God’s will and Christ’s obedience would clash with what the world called power.

But the inescapable contrast in these two parades was not the only sign of how the world had fallen away from God’s desires for it.

The city that both Christ and Pilate entered that day had long been a city divided, two cities, if you will, to match the two parades. It was the spiritual and political capital of the nation of Israel, since the days that King David chose it as the place where the tribes would be united and the Arc of the Covenant would reside in a great temple.

Jerusalem became the epicenter of life in the ancient Middle East, and, as such, it inevitably became the common ground – and the place of conflict – between secular

and religious influences. As the center of wealth and power, Jerusalem was both the holiest ground for worship and the home to great injustices against the poor and the oppressed.

Within the span of about 200 years, Jerusalem witnessed both the glory of King Solomon's reign and the abuses in society that the prophets describe. Our first reading from Micah is one of many snapshots of that latter Jerusalem the prophets give us, a city whose rulers "abhor justice and pervert all equity." In that same era, the prophet Isaiah would cry out, "How the city of faith has become a whore!"

This, then, was the city that both Jesus and Pilate claimed that day of the two parades. And in the few days that would follow, our Lord cleansed the Temple, denounced the scribes for praying long and loving short and celebrated the widow who gave her last penny to God. He celebrated the Passover with those he loved and within hours was denied and betrayed by two of them. He experienced the abandonment of the Garden of Gethsemane, the black darkness of the tomb, the rack of the cross and the piercing pain of the nails.

In and through it all, our God in the messiah experienced every aspect of the human endeavor, unspeakable agony mixed with the divine and mysterious peace of obedience, a loving, sacrificial obedience that changed every life that would be conceived and fulfilled from that day forward.

Thus we have the conflict that is Holy Week ... the collision of the divine and the earthly ... the clash of the secular and the faithful ... and the paradox of death that brings eternal life.

These are the days we remember this week, days when we see how far our God went to show the depth of divine love. So, what of us?

The authors of The Confession of 1967, one of our denomination's historic statements of faith, said it this way: "(Jesus') cross and resurrection become personal crisis and present hope."

Take in those words, brothers and sisters, "personal crisis and present hope." The Christian life requires both and Holy Week brings us both. If we think that our brokenness and sin are anything less than a crisis, then we are merely fooling ourselves. And if we think that Christ our Lord's loving, sacrificial obedience wasn't more than enough to pull us through that crisis, then we dishonor our God.

Two parades entered Jerusalem that day. The Prince of Peace from one direction and the pretender to the throne from the other. Holy Week invites us to ask: Which procession might we have turned out to see? Which ruler would we have hailed? Which ruler do we hail and worship today?

If we think about that – and in the honesty of our hearts – admit that we just might have turned out to see the parade for earthly authority, perhaps we can confess in this Holy Week and be transformed, like the centurion who, standing watch at the foot of the cross, heard Jesus breathe his last and yet still confessed: “Truly this man was God’s son.”

Amen.