

From Parade to Passion

by

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Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” ⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ⁵“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches

from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” ¹⁰When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” ¹¹The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Everyone loves a parade. Even in this season of isolation we have heard tell of some extraordinary parades – socially distant gatherings to cheer one another on. Perhaps you have seen some of these too:

After folks in the United Kingdom were asked to stay at home, a whole neighborhood in Southampton, England, stepped onto their porches and threw open their windows to sing Happy Birthday to eight-year-old Sophie.

Last week in Pasadena, California, an entire street lined with the cars of friends and neighbors waving from their yards to welcome fifteen-year-old Coco Danz home from her last chemotherapy treatment.

In India, people in several cities blew into conch shells, banged together pots and pans, rang bells and cheered their thanks for hospital staff workers and first responders.

In Barcelona, Spain, a flash mob was called together through social media to ring out support of health care professionals on the front line.

From Seattle to New Orleans to Philadelphia restaurant workers are lined up to provide meals for people in need from hospital staff to the homeless.

In the midst of our current global crisis of the spreading Coronavirus and through the shared experience of isolation and fear people all over the world have still figured out how to have a parade. Parades of gratitude, parades of solidarity, and up against the threat of many more deaths on the horizon, even parades of celebration.

We cannot be together in church today, singing with the usual procession of children waving their branches, but this year's Palm Sunday may have more of the emotional ingredients of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem than ever before. For Jesus's disciples and followers – it was a parade of hope and expectation as they chanted “Hosanna, God save us!”; but for Jesus himself, his ride into Jerusalem was actually a journey into the depths of human suffering, even unto death.

Matthew tells us that, when Jesus entered Jerusalem “the whole city was in turmoil.” The great Jewish philosopher, Abraham Heschel once wrote that “religion begins in mystery, but ends in politics.” What he meant by that is that religion must be experienced in a way that works for peace and justice in the lives of people – where they are. Jesus came riding into town offering a new kind of peace and justice that was counter to Rome's military might, and counter to the religious authorities of his day. Jesus' triumphal entry is a religious act of defiance that will turn cruelly political and will culminate on a cross on the far side of town.

This week we have had first-hand views of what cities in turmoil look like with first responders, politicians and medical leaders trying to keep the peace all the while having to compete for resources in order to care for their communities with a chaotic threat hanging in the air.

Turmoil in the city of Jerusalem was also a political mash up while fear and dread hang in the air. The band of Jesus' followers saw in him the

fulfilment of their prophetic tradition, as they herald the long awaited Messiah, the triumph of a new kind of king: “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey...”

Jesus is come, they believed, to free God’s people from oppression, to restore order and peace, and to redeem the whole creation. Thus the city shouts, “Who is this?” and the people who know Jesus give answer: “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.” They were looking to Jesus to save them.

We too are looking for something to save us these days and to relieve the suffering of this global pandemic crisis. We are looking for more Coronavirus tests, more Personal Protective Equipment, more ventilators, more Intensive Care hospital beds. We are looking for more consistency of leadership, for the bell curve to flatten, for the promise of freedom to move about and the restoration of community with one another again.

It may be a long time before we get all these things we yearn for and need. But today, on the first day of holy week, we can be assured of one critical thing that we also – all of us – need. The knowledge that Jesus enters the deepest pain and suffering that a human being might endure. He is the suffering God we need especially now.

He comes into the hurting places of the world: into overcrowded Emergency Rooms, and hospital corridors, and makeshift morgues. He comes not as the world expects, but he comes into what the world needs; the need to know that nothing, not one awful fear-filled thing, even death, can separate us from the near presence of God.

The late biblical scholar and preacher, Fred Craddock, preached a sermon called, “Why the Cross?” The sermon wrestles with why Jesus had to die. And in his remarkable style – that was in equal measure – both plain spoken and profound, Craddock made this analogy:

“Sometimes a child falls down and skins a knee or an elbow, then runs crying to his mother. The mother picks up the child and says – in what is the oldest myth in the world – ‘Let me kiss it and make it well’... She picks up the child, kisses the skinned place, holds the child in her lap, and all is well. Did her kiss make it well? No, no. It was that ten minutes in her lap.

Just sit in the lap of love and see the mother crying. ‘Mother, why are you crying?’ The child asks, ‘I am the one who hurt my elbow.’ ‘Because you are hurt,’ the mother says, ‘I hurt.’ That does more for a child than all the bandages and all the medicine in the world, just sitting on the lap. What is the Cross?” Craddock asks, making the connection, “Can I say it this way? It is to sit for a few minutes on the lap of God, who hurts because you hurt.”¹

Friends, the promise of Palm Sunday is this: In Jesus Christ, God is come into our hurting world. The biblical account of this day leads directly to Jesus’ passion, God in person entering into our hurt and pain and fear.

When the Parade gives way to the passion of Jesus we are also given answer to one of the most tragic refrains we are hearing these days – that people are dying alone. That is true in the ways that we typically comfort and support one another. Family members cannot be next to the bedside of dying loved ones. Friends cannot visit in homes where people

¹ Fred Craddock, *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, p. 240.

we know and love are in hospice care. And we ache into the distance that separates us at the mere thought that people are dying alone.

But we can take solace in this. When Jesus entered the city in turmoil, he too was entering into human isolation, suffering and death. And because of him, no human being ever actually dies alone. Jesus is right there, even when we cannot be. As the Apostle Paul said: If we live we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord, so then, whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.”^[2]

That is the hope of his Passion: While we hurt, we rest in the lap of God and in Jesus Christ – no one ever dies alone.

AMEN.

² Romans 14:8-9.