

Choose Your Parade¹—Mark 11: 1-11
Palm Sunday—March 24, 2024

The power of love is its vulnerability. God, I wish it weren't so. I wish so desperately that people, corporations, and governments could be compelled to love. But then you would undermine the very essence of love, you would rip the heart out of love. Love can't be compelled. Love doesn't have an agenda; love is a way into relationship. Love is making space for the other in a relationship of respect (listening, kindness, fairness), mutuality (shared commitment to each other and grace and forgiveness) and reciprocity (a sense of give and take). So you see, love, true love, is always invitational. Forced love is an oxymoron. Love is invitational, or it isn't love at all. Freedom and choice are defining elements of love.

That was Jesus' whole ministry; come and follow me. An invitation, no coercion. That approach rode into Jerusalem at the beginning of the final week of his life. The Jesus parade into Jerusalem said, "come and follow me". The other parade said, "bow down before me." Maybe you're wondering, "what other parade?" In recent years scholars have discovered Jesus's parade wasn't the only one in town that day. Every year on Passover, pilgrims would flock to Jerusalem to worship and remember. This Passover celebration was a time when the Jewish people celebrated the ways that their God had delivered and liberated them from the oppressive Egyptian empire long ago. Because the Romans knew what the celebration marked, the Roman governor of Judea would come to Jerusalem to keep the peace. —and to make sure that the citizens didn't get any big ideas about liberating themselves from any other empire any time soon. So, moving up from Caesarea Maritima from the West, Pontius Pilate processed into Jerusalem through the largest gate, the Western Gate, riding on a war horse with cavalry, soldiers, banners, and troops marching behind him. The streets were cleared, and large crowds gathered to watch the display. And none of the pilgrims who had gathered to worship in Jerusalem could miss the point being made: their celebration of the Passover was only happening at the tolerant pleasure of the Roman government.

On the other side of town, another, more rag-tag procession had begun. Jesus rode a colt down the Mount of Olives on the East side of the city, surrounded by a crowd of followers. They spread their cloaks and palm branches ahead of him. Pilate rode a war horse through the largest gate into the city, decked out in armor, with banners waving and troops marching behind. Jesus rode a donkey colt, through a small Eastern gate. He wore no armor and was followed by small children waving palm branches instead of banners.

¹ This reflection relies on two primary sources, Rev. Dr. Kristin Adkins-Whitesides, *Palm Sunday Sermon* (<https://asermonforeversunday.com/sermons/b18-palm-passion-sunday-year-b-2021/>), March 28, 2021. Borg, Marcus J. and Crossan, John Dominic. *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006,

There were two parades that day. But they could not have been more different. One was a military display of imperial might. And one was a small protest with a poor band of rebels crying out Hosanna. Or, as it is translated from the Hebrew, "Save us! Save us now!" Palm Sunday is a day of contrasts as we are confronted with the choice between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar. It is contrast that is central to the story of Jesus's life and to our understanding of the Gospel.

Holy Week is the apex of this story of confrontation. And Palm Sunday is its beginning. Two processions made their way into Jerusalem that day. And, as those who seek to be faithful to Jesus today, we are confronted with the question: Which parade will we choose?

There's always a choice with love. I wish it weren't so. I wish it weren't so every time my heart breaks at the plight of the plight of our poor, often addicted, often brain injured, almost always traumatized unhoused people in our community. I wish it weren't so when fear overcomes me at the sights and sounds coming from Trump rallies. I wish it weren't so when the anger and sadness wells up in me from the horrors in Palestine. I wish it weren't so when I hear the fear in the voices of trans people and the parents of trans kids as politicians cynically leverage ignorance for political points. I wish we didn't have a choice when it comes to love.

But here we are. On Palm Sunday we hear the story of a single parade. The original audience of the Jesus stories would've understood that this Jesus parade took place in contrast to the imperial parade of Pilate. No need to mention it though, it was understood. So, let's listen to the story with the ears of those first listeners. On Palm Sunday we hear the story of two parades. These parade march through our lives every day. The question is, whose parade will we join? The grace? Love will never stop marching through our lives. No matter how many times Pilate mounts up, there will always be another parade on the other side of town. Love insists on being, it cannot be stopped. Love is always inviting us into relationship, calling out to us to lay down our palms, our cloaks, our fears, our traumas, our weapons, our egos, our firmness of belief in our ideas.

We all know what's going to happen in the week ahead. In the face of love, power will defend, entrench, and crucify. That's the story we are called to enter this Holy Week, for that is the reality of a fear driven world in the face of love's vulnerability. But enter the week in faith my friends, as followers of Jesus, in hope that love won't stop it's ceaseless march. There is always more to the story for those who steadfastly watch for where God is leading us and then in joy emerge from isolation to cheer as love processes into our lives and our world, leading on beyond death to resurrection. Amen.

Rev. Joe Gaspar