

## Two Processions

*A sermon by the Rev. Daniel Simons  
at St. Paul's on the Green, Norwalk, CT*

PALM SUNDAY: APRIL 2, 2023

ISAIAH 50:4-9A | PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11 | MATTHEW 21:1-11

*In the name of God who leads us on the way of life and peace. Amen.*

So have you ever been at a picnic where the sky is bright and the day is warm and everybody's having lots of fun? And then, all of a sudden, if you look to the west, see "Ooh, there's clouds on the horizon." And then a little bit later, "Ooh, they're moving this way." And suddenly this day that was picture-perfect becomes something that is ominous. And those two things are still existing at the same time, still having this picnic, and yet there is something that says "Better pay attention - this is important. Prepare."

I always feel a little bit like that every Palm Sunday when we have this procession, which if we let ourselves just go, can be childlike: a little giddy, fun. I just love looking out there and seeing the sea of waving palms. And yet there is this multilevel set of meanings happening: some of which are implicit, some of which are explicit. There are gathering clouds. "What is it that we think we are doing here, that we think we're remembering, and what are we preparing ourselves for?" Those are good questions to ask when we do something big like a procession.

So the people who first told this story about a procession knew that they were telling exactly half of the story. There's another half that is not spoken but is understood. It was so obvious in their context that by not saying anything about it - they made the point even more obvious. And that's this: there were two processions coming into Jerusalem on opposite sides that week before Passover in the story. One is the one we just enacted - the one we just remembered. The other one was so much bigger, huge, unmistakable.

It happened every year, almost like clockwork. Pontius Pilate, who was the representative of the Emperor, Caesar (who stationed himself down in Caesarea on the coast about 40 miles away) was coming up to Jerusalem as he did every year the week before Passover, to occupy an already occupied city. Because tens of thousands of pilgrims were pouring in from around the whole empire for Passover, and Rome was there to remind them who was in charge. It was there to keep the peace, the Roman Peace, which was "our way or else," and everybody knew what the "or else" meant.

In Jerusalem, as around the entire empire, there were signs emblazoned and etched under just about everything that said, "Caesar is Lord." It was a motto required by everyone. As this procession came up from Caesarea with all of its garrisons, they carried palms: that was the symbol of royalty - of imperial power. So now to see this procession coming up from Caesarea and this procession coming in from Bethany says there's something quite provocative happening. This is more like insurrection - exactly what the Romans were there to stop.

It's almost ridiculous how mismatched these were. But what's even more ridiculous and more to the point is that Jesus, and his followers ever since, make the claim that it is mismatched in their favor.

Jesus does what he does through his whole ministry: he looks at this domination system right in the eye and says, "You do not decide what is true or real for me - you cannot touch that. I do that. Whatever else you can do does not decide my truth." And the two things that he walked with as true for him, Emmanuel, is that God was with him and God loved him - always, through anything, belonging and beloved. And that made him able to look right in the bull's eye, right in the bully's eye, and not flinch,

And this was not a unique superhuman power of Jesus. He communicated to his friends this power and they walked with it and continued to declare the same: that no threat of violence could get them to abandon their core message - that everyone belonged in God's one family, and that that meant everyone had a fair share at the table. And that it was waking up to that that was God's deliverance. That it liberated us from our deadly desire to dominate - this Pax Romana - peace through violence. It has been the peace of every empire since, including our own.

The message of Jesus' baptism, which he taught always and everywhere was: "You are my beloved." Everyone has a fair share at the table. It will always threaten the domination system of whatever age - and it should. And it will always outlast the empire - it always has, and it always will.

This is what Howard Thurman (civil rights leader that we've been reading as a core text in our sacred ground circles this year), what he said is that it is just this: the way that Jesus grounds himself in this divine belovedness, which is exactly the way we ground ourselves, is the only way to walk so that we don't start using hate and fear as our tools. We have to know we are loved and everyone else is, or we will use those tools in us as they have been used on us by the dominating powers.

So, this Palm Sunday (really every day of our lives, but we see it clearly now), the question hangs over us: Which procession are we in, and which procession do we choose? It is so easy to be complicit in Caesar's procession, to get along to get ahead. We're swimming in it every day. And some of that is not just by going along with it - it can also be by resisting it and reacting against it - it's still the same game.

But to play a different game, as Jesus did, to say, "You can't tell me who I am and whose I am. That doesn't belong to you." That is the invitation. How we join that Jesus procession: dare to know ourselves and everyone else as loved, beloved, belonging to God. And then willing to walk with joy into any and every circumstance, even when the dark clouds are gathering, when things are threatening - free from within, and able to pass that liberating freedom along to others.

As we enter this Holy Week walk together, very often religious communities bid their followers to focus on Jesus' suffering, which really isn't any deeper suffering than tens of thousands, if not millions - many millions of people have suffered along the way under the boot of the empire, whichever one it is.

But I invite you this Holy Week, instead of focusing on Jesus' suffering, watch how he behaves in these circumstances that he faces: it's with an equanimity that is extraordinary. Watch his incredible lack of resistance and yet full possession of his inner dignity. Watch how Caesar's procession isn't even worth mentioning.

Watch how the empire weighs nothing at all. Again, it's not superhuman - it's fully human. It's Jesus, not fearless - but rooted in belonging and belovedness, and inviting us to follow in that way.

So come, let's walk this way, this Holy Week together, this way of Jesus, this way of brave and hospitable love. Amen.