

LELC Palm Sunday 2019

We begin Holy Week today with all the wonderful traditions of Palm Sunday. Reading the story, waving our palm branches. Singing our “Hosannas.” By the end of the service today, we will have read and account of the events that unfolded over this week we call Holy – paradoxically because by the end it seems altogether unholy that Jesus has died on a cross.

So, how did that happen? What can we know about the events in Jerusalem that week, maybe even this first day, that it all ended up the way it did. Actually, a fair bit. Historians suggest that there were probably two parades that day when Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. To understand the other, it helps to know a little geography.

Jerusalem was the official capital of the region of Judea. Of which Pilate was the governor. But Jerusalem was this dusty, dirty old city, up against the hills to the east. But over on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea was this brand spanking new town that Herod the Great had built. It was called Caesarea Maritima. It was quite the swanky seaside resort with two man-made harbors made from that Roman invention: ~~concrete~~^{Cement}. History suggests that Pilate hung out there as much as he could – except when duty called and he had to be in Jerusalem to do his governor thing.

Quite probably, at the beginning of the week before the Jewish festival of freedom, Passover, was set to be celebrated Pilate made a habit of showing up in Jerusalem to be there just in case things got out of hand, To manage the restless unpredictability of the crowds in town, Pilate might even have brought over some extra troops. He, or they, would have come marching into town from the west, coming down the coast to Joppa and then over to Jerusalem through Emmaus.

One can almost imagine what that parade must have been like. The jangle of bits and bridles on the horses pulling the chariots. The Creak of the leather of the soldiers uniforms? The clanking of their armor and swords? The tromp, tromp, tromp of soldiers marching in unison. Just your typical show of force to keep the peace. And it is not hard to imagine who might have shown up to watch that parade: the people who welcomed and valued the “security” that those troops represented – the rich, the powerful, the well-connected, the ones for whom the status quo was just fine, thank you very much. This parade would have been violence enforcing the domination system writ large.

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Hold that imagine in your mind as we think about the other parade, the one that was happening on the other side of town. Coming in from the east was Jesus. He has just been with his friends in Bethany, which is near Bethphage and the Mount of Olives by the way. Where is that exactly? Well, the Mount of Olives is the area on the rocky hillside east of old Jerusalem where there were olive orchards.

Bethphage, was were they grew figs: *beth* being the Hebrew word for house and *phage* meaning "figs". And Bethany is the house of the *Anee*, *Anee* is the Hebrew word for the poor, the downtrodden. Bethany was the town were the day laborers and hired hands lived. The rich of Jerusalem almost certainly thought of it as the slums.

In contrast to the parade on the west side of town, Jesus comes riding into town from the east, on a donkey. The farm workers and day laborers cut branches to wave as he passed by. They shouted "Hosanna" and "Blessed is the King.." Surely in their minds they were hailing a new king who would rescue them from this present oppression which was the occupation by the Roman Empire and the exploitation by the corruption of their local rulers who were in collusion with the Romans. I'm guessing the part about the donkey, a humble beast of burden and no war horse, was lost on them.

But I doubt it was lost on the soldiers looking on. I have to imagine that as the troops made their way to their barracks after a long day of marching they either saw or heard about the ragtag Jesus parade. To these well-trained troops, Jesus' little sideshow would have seemed laughable. Palm branches?!! Where are the swords? The shields? And a donkey?!! Ha!! Part of me believes that the whole Jesus story might have ended there if it hadn't been for what Jesus did next.

Significant lament over not recognizing "things that make for peace"
Luke's version is the tamest, and we don't usually read it on Palm Sunday, but after Jesus came into Jerusalem on that donkey, he went to the Temple and he drove out the buyers and sellers. (Matthew and Mark goes further, saying he overturned their tables, messed up the whole place.) Kind of makes you wonder what was happening in the Temple that made Jesus call them a den of robbers. I don't think it was just a bake sale.

The Temple was the place where people came to make their offerings and sacrifices to God, it was where they came to connect with God. Offering and sacrifices had two main purposes: to say "thank you" or to say "I'm sorry, please forgive me." And to understand why Jesus called it a den of robbers you have to imagine maybe a humble family who have come in from the far countryside to make a sacrifice

because Mom is sick and they want to ask for forgiveness so she can get well. Imagine they have brought their very best lamb, one they picked out right when it was born and they have kept it safe and well-fed all this time just for this purpose, to be the spotless lamb for their sacrifice.

But! Before they can make the sacrifice the lamb has to be inspected. Oh dear. The inspector priest finds a blemish. Too bad. Now they have to buy a new pre-approved lamb. Scam #1. Uh-oh, to buy a lamb in the Temple they have to exchange their unclean Roman coinage for clean Jewish currency. Scam #2. And - quite possibly - Scam #3, once they have made their sacrifice some other priest gets to come by with a big old three-pronged fork and stick it into their cooking pot and take whatever he can get on his fork for himself. Or to sell, if he wanted to the folks who, in those days, came by the temples where sacrifices happened because that was where the rich could get fresh meat everyday.

When Jesus overturned the tables of the buyers and sellers he was committing an egregious act of civil disobedience. He was disrupting the money-making machine of the religious authorities. And they were furious - both to be called out and to have their day's business disrupted. I have no doubt the chief priests were a little afraid that Jesus might spark a rebellion that the Romans would be forced to put down. But what really chapped their buns was this guy who had been all around the country healing people and declaring God's forgiveness without any of those folks having to come into town to make a sacrifice. That cannot stand and they needed to get rid of him ASAP!

As Jesus leaves the disarray of the Temple the fateful events of the coming week have been set in motion. The collusion between Roman authorities and the local status-quo keepers will see to it. None of them can abide a leader boldly proclaiming the way of nonviolent resistance; the justice of equality and inclusion; healing and well-being for all, and the freedom of forgiveness borne of God's love.

As the week unfolds the crowds who waved their palms and shouted "Hosanna!" will begin to understand that Jesus wasn't going to be a king like David or Pilate or Herod. Jesus was going to be a very different kind of kingdom of a very different kind of kingdom. Before long, those who stood and cheered the parade of soldiers will be the ones in the inner courtyard who shout "Crucify, crucify." The ones who waved palm branches will have scattered, hiding in fear for their lives.

I'd like to think I would have been one of the ones on the east side of town, hailing Jesus as king. Though one never knows for sure. Even if I were, I've no doubt I would have run and hid along with the rest.

It took the Jesus' followers quite a while to understand all that God was doing in their midst, in their streets, on those hills, in those fateful days. Over the years theologians have gotten into the act and complicated the heck out of it. But I'm of the opinion that it is all still as simple as it was that day.

Which parade do we cheer at? Which leader do we follow? One is merely the current version of the world's same-old, same-old game of violence and domination. The other – whether we recognize it or not – is the fullness of the revelation of God in Jesus' way of humble service and self-giving love.

The world today is as sad and scary as I have ever known it. But my faith, my hope, my joy is still in following this humble Jesus, riding on a donkey. Ever and ever he is riding onward to give his life on that cross and free us all from the power that sin and the fear of death have over us.

Especially now, when the ways of sin and death, violence and domination seem to be gaining strength in every corner of our world, let us turn and follow this Jesus. Let us let his undying love and his resurrected life be lived out in this age – through even us. Amen.