

Matthew 21:1-11

¹When 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 he 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."

Isaiah 50:4-9a

⁴ The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he awakens—
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.
⁵ The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backwards.
⁶ I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.
⁷ The Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
⁸ he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.

⁹ It is the Lord GOD who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?

MARCHING IN THE RIGHT PARADE

Jesus knew the Old Testament scripture; when he was “left behind” in Jerusalem as a child his parents found him discussing scripture with teachers in the Temple. He quoted scripture against Satan in the wilderness. At his first sermon on record he knows exactly what scroll to pick and where to roll it in order to read the appropriate verses. So we could imagine that these verses from our Old Testament lesson from the prophet Isaiah would have been playing through Jesus’ mind as he rode that donkey into Jerusalem on the Sunday before Passover; “It is the Lord God who helps me. Who will declare me guilty?” “I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame.” Jesus knew what he faced in Jerusalem; he had told disciples three times about his arrest, death, and resurrection. *Who would declare him guilty?* In five days Pontius Pilate would. *Who would put him to shame?* The Roman soldiers who would flog him, spit upon him, dress him up in a robe and a crown of thorns, march him through the streets with a cross, and nail him to it. For Jesus, confrontation with the Roman authorities in Jerusalem was not just a possibility; it was a certainty. In fact, it seems likely that Jesus planned this confrontation, and of course he knew what the immediate result would be. At the same time he put his faith in the God who had spoken those words from the prophet Isaiah, “It is the Lord God who helps me. Who will declare me guilty?” A human court most certainly could, but Jesus knew that the Father, whose will he had kept, could never declare him guilty. Such was the faith and courage of Jesus.

You may have noticed that I refer to today as Palm Sunday and not Palm Sunday SLASH Passion Sunday. I’m taking my cue from Jesus and bravely contesting the conventional wisdom that would have clergy celebrate both palms and Passion today, but there no such thing as *Passion Sunday* because the Passion of Jesus took place on a Friday. Conventional wisdom says we should bring up the Passion of Jesus today because few of you are likely to attend a Good Friday service, and I should not let the congregation transition from one jubilant celebration to another without bringing up the suffering and death of Jesus. Simply put, the church is caving in to modern religious apathy, the mindset that says Sundays and Sundays alone are church days. That is a terrible reason to tweak a tradition that is nearly as old as the church. Besides, I have found that indulging religious apathy only serves to attract or retain apathetic people into the pews, thus creating or maintaining an apathetic church - I would much rather have a few zealous worshipers than a thousand passionless people filling the pews. Well the authorities need not worry, because I do intend to talk about the Passion of

Jesus today, but I don't need to skip ahead in the readings in order to do so; the Passion of Jesus is implicit to Palm Sunday. What's more, we are called by Christ to take our own little ride through Jerusalem, to face the same danger as Jesus faced in order that we might also share in his resurrection.

It's very tempting to celebrate Palm Sunday as a festive, joyful parade. I remember watching Fourth of July parades as a child, in Bay Village, Ohio. I must have been only six or seven years old. My brother, who was a cub scout or boy scout, marched in some of those parades. Our American experience of parades is generally a good one; those who march in them are our friends, family and neighbors. If soldiers are part of the parade they are American soldiers. But not all people in this world experience parades as a good thing. In 1940, the German Army *paraded* into Paris; the average Parisian was not so thrilled by the spectacle, just as the average German was not so thrilled when British, French, and American troops *paraded* into Berlin in 1918. Parades were originally military processions intended to show the audience who was the boss. They were intended to instill a bit of fear into the local population, to discourage any idea of an uprising lest those who are involved be snuffed by the forces currently marching on parade. In the time that Jesus lived on earth, such a parade would have been going on in Jerusalem every year at the beginning of Passover week as the Roman legion marched into the city. Passover, after all, is a celebration of the Jewish people's exodus from slavery as subjects of the Egyptian empire. But the citizens of Judea were now subjects of the Roman Empire, and while Rome tolerated this holiday they understood that passions could get out of hand, particularly at a time when the local population is celebrating independence from an empire. Therefore it was customary for Pontius Pilate to enter Jerusalem from the west with his well-armed soldiers, complete with cavalry and drums and marching feet before the Jewish festivities began, just to remind the locals who the boss really was.

And so on Palm Sunday, probably somewhere around 33 A.D., there were two parades in Jerusalem; as the Roman legion entered Jerusalem from the west, Jesus and a hodgepodge of peasants from the region of Galilee entered Jerusalem from the east, through the Golden Gate, the gate through which the people believed the *messiah*, or Savior of Israel would one day enter. My guess is that these two parades occurred simultaneously – Jesus after all had precisely planned the *way* in which he would enter Jerusalem – upon a donkey, as the prophet Micah had foretold; we can therefore assume that he paid as much attention to the *time* of his entry, having it coincide with the Roman entrance into Jerusalem. Two parades, from two ends of the city, occurring at about the same time. One parade represented the kingdom of Rome; the other represented the kingdom of God.

From the very beginning of his ministry Jesus had been declaring "The kingdom of God is at hand." He could have spoken of the *family* of God, the *community* of God, the *people* of God, but instead he chose to speak of the *kingdom* of God. What's more is that Jesus spoke of this kingdom as *already come, as here now*, though it had not come to full bloom. The people of Jesus' day would have understood *kingdom* to mean the Roman Empire, or perhaps King Herod (but he was only a puppet of the Roman Empire). You didn't mess with the kingdom of Rome or, by extension, the Kingdom of Herod. To do so would be worse than suicide as the Romans reserved the method of execution called crucifixion for those who directly challenged Roman authority. The people of Jerusalem had challenged Rome in 6 A.D. only to have the city sacked and over two thousand of its inhabitants, or roughly five percent of the population, crucified in mass. And so the whole kingdom message was extremely dangerous for Jesus, as it had been for John the Baptist. The only thing that kept Jesus from being arrested was the fact that he had restricted his ministry to the countryside, to the Jews, more specifically to the *peasant* Jews, the ones who welcomed the notion of a new kingdom that would replace the one that was bleeding them dry. You see, up until Jesus' day, the dominant political system that operated throughout the entire world was what Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan refer to as a *domination system*,¹ where the rich are powerful and the powerful are rich, and they rule by violence and divine decree ("God put me here, and if you mess with me I will squash you with impunity!"). Even the nation of Israel, whose Law was intended to ensure that such a domination system could not exist, quickly fell into corruption; most of what the Old Testament prophets are proclaiming is God's wrath over the leaders' failure to follow the rules. The leaders tweak the rules in order to abuse the poor, making them more poor. Jesus, with his kingdom of God message, becomes the champion of the poor, and his support was probably pretty significant. So when he announced that he was going to the big city, to Jerusalem, he also announced that he would be arrested and tried and killed and resurrected. Jesus knew that the kingdom of man would not allow the prospect of the kingdom of God to survive. A system that relied on violence and injustice could not accommodate a system based on peace and justice. The Palm Sunday procession into Jerusalem was nothing less than a peaceful protest against a repressive regime. It was a confrontation between the new world order and the old world order, and such a confrontation clearly points forward to an event like that which occurred on Good Friday.

But it points further ahead, to Easter Sunday and the resurrection. And the resurrection points further ahead to the continued growth of the kingdom of God in this world. We may complain about our country and the state of the world in general, but I don't think we recognize how responsible Jesus is for the progress that has been made in this world in regards to human rights

and social justice. Look at the United States for example. While our founding fathers might not have been *Christian* by the narrow definition of the word, they embraced the principles that Jesus represented when he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Jesus said, "the greatest among you is the one who serves the most;" we understand our President and our legislators to be *servants* of the people. Thomas Jefferson refers to the right of every person to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; how perfectly do those ideals correspond with peace, justice, and prosperity? Somehow the words "One nation under God" and "In God we trust" have become a part of our heritage. And who is that God in whom we trust? None other than God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who rides a mule into a maelstrom on Palm Sunday, making a stark distinction between the kingdoms of man and the true kingdom of God! It's true that we still see that the *domination system* is alive and well in the world today. It's also true that even democracies are far from perfect - how long did it take *this* democracy to abolish slavery or to give women the right to vote? All of this goes to prove just how reluctantly those who have power release their grip on power. But what Jesus did, by riding into Jerusalem with an entourage of nobodies, to directly confront the old order, has probably inspired and continues to inspire his followers to resist evil in all forms, and to resist it peacefully, trusting, like Jesus, that God would vindicate them and they would not be put to shame.

Today we celebrate the baptism of James D'Orazio, but, just as there is a somber element of our Palm Sunday celebration, there is a somber element to this celebration as well. Baptism has always been intended to be a symbol of death, as is the cup we drink in Holy Communion; Jesus once asked his disciples James and John, "Are you ready to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (Mark 10:38). The ritual of baptism is a symbol of death and resurrection in the here and now, dying to self and resurrection in Christ. Because James is a tad bit young to answer, I ask Steve and Amy and Kevin and Jennifer, "Are you willing to lead James down a path that will lead him to say 'yes' to following Jesus on a rather rough path that may take him right into Jerusalem, right into confrontation with those who would deny Christ's kingdom?" Are you willing to keep James in the right parade? And as any parent or uncle, or aunt would know, we raise a child by example: the question becomes ours; the baptism becomes ours; the narrow path becomes ours, and we must always ask ourselves if we are in the right parade.

And as history testifies to our stubborn addiction to power and wealth, we desperately need one another, as the Church, as the Body of Christ, to keep one another on that path and in the right parade. It's easy to get lost, to stray from that path, and it's just as easy to start marching in the wrong parade. We may not even recognize the power and privilege that we wield as

Americans. We have the resources to affect great change in this world, for better or for worse. May our path rest with Jesus, with the kingdom of God, the cross ever before us, just around that bend. And may God give us the faith and courage to march in *that* parade, certain that as we face danger and even the prospect of death, that we also share in the Resurrection.

ⁱ Borg, Marcus J., Crossan, John Dominic, *The Last Week* (Harper Collins, 2009).