

**Philippians 2:5-11**

**Mark 11:1-11**

**April 13, 2014**

**Palm Sunday**

**Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC**

## **PARADES AND POWER**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

She arrived by jet plane. A white stretch limousine took her to her official portrait sitting in the beautiful gardens. She was due to arrive in the city on a riverboat, but bad weather forced a change of plans.

She had a court of eight attendants. The princess court included five young women. Over one hundred other young women served as belles. Eight cadets in full uniform were on hand to escort her attendants.

She was crowned with “new, sparkly headwear,” by a leading citizen of the city she was visiting. She rode in a one-mile long parade that included floats, marching units and bands, clowns, horses, celebrities, and her attendants and courts. 100,000 people lined the parade route.

“She” is the 2014 Azalea Queen, Kirsten Haglund, Miss America 2008. At her coronation on Wednesday, the Queen told the crowd that she planned to use her festival reign as a chance to serve the attendees. “Getting the crown isn’t just about you and the sparkles and the exultation in the moment,” said the Queen. “I will take this opportunity to serve you.”<sup>1</sup>

Who doesn’t love a parade? The grandest presidential inaugural parade was held on Tuesday, January 20, 1953, for President Dwight Eisenhower. The two and one-half hour parade passed more than one million onlookers. The parade included: 22,000 service men and women, 5000 civilians, fifty state and organization floats, sixty-five musical units, three hundred fifty horses, three elephants, an Alaskan dog team, and a 280-millimeter atomic cannon.<sup>2</sup>

Twenty-four years later, President Jimmy Carter broke with tradition and walked the mile-plus parade route. A Wisconsin senator had originally suggested the new President walk the route, to set a good example for physical fitness. Carter initially rejected the idea, but reconsidered three weeks before the parade. In his presidential memoir, he wrote, “I wanted to provide a vivid demonstration of my confidence in the people as far as security was concerned, and I felt a simple walk would be a tangible indication of some reduction in the imperial status of the president and his family.”<sup>3</sup> Since 1977, all but one of the newly inaugurated presidents has walked at least a portion of the parade route.

In their book, *The Last Week*, about Jesus' final week in Jerusalem, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan paint a picture of two very different parades into Jerusalem on a Sunday some 1,980 years ago. Jesus came into the city from the East, down from the Mount of Olives, through the Kidron Valley, and up the hill to Jerusalem. From the West came Pontius Pilate, as he entered Jerusalem at the end of his sixty mile journey from his palace in the newly built coastal city called Caesarea Maritima.

Of course, we don't know for sure that these two parades happened at the same time. We do know from the four gospels that Jesus paraded into Jerusalem on the Sunday before the beginning of the Passover Festival. We also know that Pontius Pilate spent as much time as he possibly could away from Jerusalem, over on the coast. He had to have traveled to Jerusalem at some point to oversee his troops during Festival Week.

Borg and Crossan write, "Imagine the imperial procession's arrival in the city. A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful . . . Pilate's military procession was a demonstration of both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology [which said] the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome, but the Son of God."<sup>4</sup>

Compare their description of Pilate's parade to Mark's description of Jesus' parade down from the Mount of Olives and up to the Temple mount in Jerusalem: "Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'" (Mark 11:7-10)

After telling two of his disciples to get him a donkey, Jesus is strangely silent during his Palm Sunday parade. He doesn't respond in any way to the shouts of the crowd: "Hosanna! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!" Jesus didn't really have to talk to get his message across that Sunday in Jerusalem. As the footnote my study Bible says, "Jesus dramatized his offer of himself as the Messiah, putting his emphasis on humility. Like a parable, his action had to be understood and accepted."

Think about how Jesus lived his life — the things he did, the things he taught and preached, the way he treated people, the message he delivered with his words and his actions. Think about the events of the week stretching out before him as he rode into Jerusalem on that Sunday, on the back of a donkey. Think about what he would do for us on Friday afternoon of that week, on a cross on a hill called Golgotha. Now think about the Azalea Queen's comment at her coronation on Wednesday: "Getting the crown isn't just about you and the sparkles and the exultation in the moment. I will take this opportunity to serve you." Jesus didn't say anything as he rode on the donkey (at least, according to Mark's story), but as he ate the Last Supper with his disciples,

Jesus told them, “I am among you as one who serves.” As today’s epistle lesson puts it, “he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:8)

Jesus acted out the parable of Zechariah 9:9-10 in the Old Testament: “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.”

Imagine being a Jewish pilgrim just getting to Jerusalem that Sunday for the Passover Festival. You are coming in at one of the western gates of the city. Maybe you’re from Jamnia or Lydda or Joppa on the seacoast. All of sudden, you find yourself swept up or swept aside by the pomp and pageantry of Pilate’s parade, with its unmistakable message of imperial power that says, “Don’t mess with Rome!”

You quickly make your way across town to the eastern side of the city. You’re hot and tired and anxious to see your family that is gathering for the big festival. You arrive at one of the eastern gates just as the other parade of the day is entering. You see a man on a donkey, sitting on some shabby cloaks. You notice some palm branches on the ground and in the hands of the people who are shouting, “Hosanna!” You ask the guy next to you, “Where did he come from?” When you hear, “Down from the Mount of Olives,” you remember the words you memorized in synagogue: “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.” You think, “Could he be the one?”

Maybe you compare the two parades and wonder, “How can this King on a donkey stand a chance against the Roman cavalry, foot soldiers, armor, helmets and spears, golden eagles and banners?” If you happen to be outside the northwest city walls on Friday, you see the “King of the Jews” nailed to the cross by the Romans. That would have to make you wonder.

At the end of their first chapter in *The Last Week*, Borg and Crossan write, “Two processions entered Jerusalem on that day. The same question, the same alternative, faces those who would be faithful to Jesus today. Which procession are we in? Which procession do we want to be in? This is the question of Palm Sunday and of the week that is about to unfold.”<sup>5</sup>

That’s a good question: Which procession do we want to be in? The pomp and panoply of Pilate’s parade is enticing, even to this day. The humility and simple nature of the donkey parade is appealing and admirable, but the fact that that parade takes us right through the middle of town to the hill of crucifixion at the end of the week is not as tempting. Don’t you think it would have been better for Jesus to ride into Jerusalem humbly on a donkey, and then marshal his forces against the hated Romans? As the Jewish pilgrims gathered to celebrate and remember God freeing them from slavery in Egypt, there must have been **some** political overtones and hopes in their cries of “Hosanna! Save us! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!”

It's easy, and rather common, to talk about the fickle crowd of Palm Sunday — “They shouted ‘Hosanna!’ on Sunday and ‘Crucify him!’ on Friday.” Whether or not the two crowds were made up of the same people, we don't know. But think about the people who watched the Palm Sunday parade on the eastern end of Jerusalem and then saw the pitiful parade to Calvary on Friday morning. What kind of king is this? Which procession do I want to be in?

Well, he's the kind of king “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.”

He's the kind of king who took a loaf of bread and said, “Take; this is my body,” and cup and said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.”

He's the kind of king who saved others, but would not save himself.

He's the kind of king who prayed, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.”

As one writer has put it, “He is no less king than their words suggest, but his kingdom is other and more than they dare to think.”<sup>6</sup>

He's the kind of king about whom we will sing, “Ride on! Ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die: O Christ, Thy triumphs now begin O'er captive death and conquered sin. Ride on! Ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die; Bow Thy meek head to mortal pain, Then take, O God, Thy power, and reign.”

Through the years, Christians have embellished the gospel stories. We have named the repentant thief on the cross; we have invented “The Fourth Wise Man”; we write songs about what Lazarus must have felt and thought after being raised from the dead. Of course, there is no scriptural basis for these stories. And yet, our stories express what we want to believe and how we want to live as followers of Jesus Christ, the humble king on the donkey.

I came across such a modern day parable called “Palm Monday.” It goes like this: On the Monday after Palm Sunday, the little donkey awakened, his mind still savoring the afterglow of the most exciting day of his life. Never before had he felt such a rush of pleasure and pride. He walked into town and found a group of people by the well. “I'll show myself to them,” he thought. But they didn't notice him. They went on drawing their water and paid him no mind. “Throw your garments down,” he said crossly. “Don't you know who I am?” They just looked at him in amazement. Someone slapped him across the tail and ordered him to move. The donkey said, “I'll just go to the market where the good people are. They will remember.”

But the same thing happened. No one paid any attention to the donkey as he strutted down the main street in front of the marketplace. “The palm branches! Where are the palm branches?” he shouted. “Yesterday you threw palm branches!”

Hurt and confused, the donkey returned home to his mother. “Foolish child,” she said gently. “Don't you realize that without him, you are just an ordinary donkey?”

Two parades on a Sunday, many years ago. But these two parades keep on going: the pomp and pageantry and imperial power displayed in Pilate's parade, and the passion and divine power on display in Jesus' parade, as he rides toward the cross of Good Friday.

Which parade do we want to be in? That's a good question. . .

***Let us pray: On this day of great rejoicing, Lord Jesus Christ, when we welcome you as our King and Savior, we also walk in the shadow of your cross. Strengthen our faith on this Palm Sunday so that when the time comes to carry the cross we might still call out to you with heartfelt praise. Give us the grace and the courage to follow you this Holy Week from death to resurrection, from darkness to the fullness of light. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Caitlin Dineen, "Queen sees herself as servant to the festival," *Star News* (Thursday, April 10, 2014), p. 1A.

<sup>2</sup> [www.eisenhower.archives.gov](http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov)

<sup>3</sup> "Presidential Strut is Now Iconic Inaugural Moment," at [www.bigstory.ap.org](http://www.bigstory.ap.org)

<sup>4</sup>Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), pp. 3,2.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup>Rev. Donald Ng, "Untying Donkeys," found at [www.fcbsf.org](http://www.fcbsf.org).