

Psalm 118:19-29

Matthew 21:1-11

March 25, 2018

Palm Sunday

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

DON'T RAIN ON MY PARADE

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.

“I hate to rain on your parade, but . . .” That’s sorta like saying, “I have some good news and some bad news . . .”

A quick Google search of “rain on your parade” turned up the following:

1. it means to spoil someone’s fun or ruin a pleasurable moment
2. it means to mention bad news or to give negative information to someone who is happy or excited about something

3. “Rain on your parade” seems to have come into use in the 1960’s after Barbra Streisand sang “Don’t Rain on My Parade” in the Broadway musical *Funny Girl*. Fanny Brice is ready to quit performing if her boyfriend, Nick, just out of jail, asks her to marry him. Instead, Nick tells Fanny they should break up. She pretends she feels the same way, and then sings “Don’t Rain on My Parade” after Nick leaves her dressing room. As she looks to her future, at the very end of the song, Fanny Brice sings,

*Get ready for me, love
‘Cause I’m a “comer”
I simply gotta march
My heart’s a drummer
Nobody, no, nobody
Is gonna rain on my parade!*

We also say that “everybody loves a parade!” Last week we heard about all of the St. Patrick’s Day parades across the country. In three weeks, the Azalea Festival parade will roll through Wilmington. The news has been full of stories about the president’s proposed military parade in Washington. Everybody loves a parade, and nobody wants it to rain on their parade.

In late fall 1898, Kaiser Wilhelm II, the last emperor of Germany and king of Prussia, visited Jerusalem. In preparation for the Kaiser’s visit, the newly appointed governor of Jerusalem oversaw the following renovations: a massive clean-up of the city; the demolition of some buildings and the renovation of others near the Jaffa Gate; the repair of the city’s water system; the rebuilding of markets; the construction of telegraph lines to Berlin; the paving of roads along the Kaiser’s route; new buildings and the whitewashing of old buildings; the tearing down of a wall near the Jaffa Gate, the

filling in of a moat, and the widening of a gap so the Kaiser would not have to climb down from his carriage when he entered the city.

The travel agency in charge of arrangements — Thomas Cook & Son — built a huge tent city outside the city walls: seventy-five residential tents, six large hospitality tents, and six fully equipped kitchen tents. There were also several prefabricated buildings sent by boat from Germany. The tents were furnished by wealthy Jerusalem families. As a final touch, the city's governor ordered all dogs and beggars to be rounded up and sent to neighboring villages.

On Sunday afternoon, October 29, 1898, Kaiser Wilhelm II, rode into Jerusalem, along with his wife and his entourage. On hand to greet the king were many dignitaries, journalists and photographers from around the world, and crowds that cheered the king's arrival. The king was given a twenty-one gun salute. I couldn't find a weather report for Jerusalem for that day in October 1898, so I don't know if it rained. It is said that after the parade ended, someone climbed up and hung a banner across the Jaffa Gate that read, "A better man than Wilhelm came through this city's gate. He rode on a donkey."¹

Indeed, he did! Compare Matthew's description of the preparation for Jesus' parade into Jerusalem with that of Kaiser Wilhelm II: "When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying 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. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them."' And he will send them immediately." (Matthew 21:1-3)

Matthew tells us the disciples put their cloaks on the donkeys, that some people spread their cloaks on the road, and other people cut branches from the tree and spread them on the road. But no paving of the roads. No luxury tents set up outside the city walls. No equivalent of a twenty-one gun salute. No widening of the city gate. No donations from the wealthy families in Jerusalem. But there is an interesting parallel between the two parades — the cheering crowds. We don't know what the crowds were shouting as Kaiser Wilhelm II and his entourage rode by, but Matthew tells us the crowds in Jerusalem on that other Sunday afternoon were welcoming a king: "Hosanna to the son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (Matthew 21:9)

The contrast between these two kings riding into Jerusalem couldn't be any sharper. Despite all of the pomp and circumstance of his 1898 Jerusalem visit, Kaiser (Caesar! Isn't that interesting?!) Wilhelm II is remembered as an ineffective war-time leader during World War I, whose generals ignored him and army didn't support him. He abdicated his throne in 1918 and fled to the Netherlands. On the other hand, today we recall a humble, much less showy entrance into Jerusalem by someone whom we worship as the King of kings. He didn't turn out to be the kind of king the crowds were expecting. But he didn't abdicate his throne, either, and because Jesus was obedient — even to the point of death on a cross — he has been exalted as the true King of kings.

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 not quite 2,000 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 beach town called Caesarea Maritima.

Of course, we don't know for sure that these two parades actually 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 possible away from Jerusalem, but he had to have traveled to Jerusalem at some point to oversee his troops and other administrative matters — to keep the peace, if you will, 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."

At the end of their first chapter — Palm Sunday — in *The Last Week*, Borg and Crossan write, "Two processions entered Jerusalem 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."²

Which procession are we in? Which procession do we want to be in? We wave our palms and shout "Hosanna!" today and it's fun and it's exciting and it's energizing and it's tradition. But how aware are we about what we are shouting and singing and asking of God?

Something good happens, something unexpected happens, some immense relief is felt, and even a non-religious person might shout "Hallelujah!" A quick study of usage in informal language shows that in modern English, "Hallelujah!" is often used to express happiness that something hoped for or waited for happened. It doesn't even have to have any religious significance attached, even though "Hallelujah!" means "Praise the Lord!"

The same can almost be said about our shouts of "Hosanna!" Maybe you think it's just something to sing and say on Palm Sunday. Really, think about it, when else do we ever sing or shout "Hosanna!"? So it's easy to hear the story of that first Palm Sunday and imagine the crowds shouting "Hosanna!" as nothing more than a raucous welcome to Jesus. Or maybe there's more to it than that. As the bulletin margin note says, "Hosanna!" is made up of two Hebrew words that mean, "Save, we pray!" We read these words in our responsive reading this morning: "Hosanna! Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!"

Psalm 118 is one of six psalms (113-118) that are called the Hallel Psalms or Praise Psalms. In these six psalms, we hear the story of how God rescued his people Israel from Pharaoh's grip and delivered them into the Promised Land. When Jews celebrated the Passover, they would sing 113-114 before the meal and 115-118 after the meal. After Jesus had eaten his last supper with the disciples, "When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." (Mark 14:26) Jesus and his disciples might very well have sung the very same hymn we read as our Old Testament lesson today. Just think about that!

When the crowds on that first Palm Sunday shouted "Hallelujah! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" they were expressing a long-held and deep hope for a Messiah. As one commentator puts it, "Psalm 118 gives thanks for God's deliverance. He saved his people from disaster and their king from death. God has made a new day. He has delivered his people because of his steadfast love. Since God has brought deliverance (it is the day he made), the people engage in self-exhortation: 'let us rejoice in it.'"³

The triumphant and victorious king entered Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday, humble and riding on a donkey. No drumbeats. No creaking of leather. No cavalry on horses. No royal banners. No twenty-one gun salute. No journalists from around the world. Just a man on a donkey riding on to die.

I hate to rain on your Palm Sunday parade, but if we find that we'd rather be in Pontius Pilate's parade, with its glamour and apparent power and its impressive size, we misunderstand the meaning of this coming Holy Week.

I hate to rain on your Palm Sunday parade, but if we ignore what happens just before Jesus' palm parade and what happens between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday, we misunderstand the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

I hate to rain on your Palm Sunday parade, but if we're not willing to go through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday before we get to Easter Sunday, we aren't welcoming the kind of king that Jesus really is.

We read God's Word together this morning: "Hosanna! Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation."

Our salvation rode into Jerusalem that day on a donkey. Our salvation still calls us today to follow him. Will we join the parade?

Let us pray: God of all, you gave your only-begotten Son to take the form of a servant, and to be obedient even to death on a cross. Give us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, that, sharing in his humility, we may come to be with him in his glory. Amen.

NOTES

¹Carl Hoffman, “Historical Exhibition: Kaiser Is Coming . . . Again!” November 1, 2012 at The Jerusalem Post, www.jpost.com. I found the story about the man hanging the banner from the Jaffa Gate in a sermon by Rev. Dr. Joanna Adams, “A Beautiful Mind,” March 20, 2005 at www.day1.org. However, I could independently verify the story, despite finding reference to it in other sermons.

²Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus’ Final Week in Jerusalem* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006). The description of Pilate’s parade is found on pp. 2-3. The authors’ question is found on p. 30.

³John Mark Hicks, “The Egyptian Hallel and the Lord’s Supper (Psalm 113-118),” at www.johnmarkhicks.com.