

I Love A Parade!

Palm Sunday – March 20, 2016

First Congregational Church, Oshkosh, WI

I love a parade! No, wait. Really, I do! The bands, floats, horses, the whole ensemble, the crowds, the anticipation as flags come up the street and people politely applaud or cheer or laugh at the Shriner's motor scooters and clowns on wheels. the whole entourage. I love it!

Growing up where and when I did, parades were a regular feature of my childhood landscape. In our hometown we had the largest Halloween Mummers Parade on the East Coast save the one in Philadelphia. When I was nine years old, I missed the Memorial Day Parade because the bath my aunt insisted I take prior to going caused the measles to break out all over my body. The Apple Blossom Festival Parade in Winchester, VA was a favorite as a teenager. And, any parade in which my brother marched and played the snare drums whether it be high school bands or drum and bugle corps, was thrilling to me. No wonder I enjoyed being in *The Music Man* on stage as a seventy year old. "Rump-ta-tum, seventy-six trombones led the big parade, and a

hundred and six cornets....” And, when Fanny and I were given front row seats from a total stranger for the Rose Bowl Parade in 1995 we thought certainly Irish eyes had smiled on us from above and beyond. I love a parade!

Today, we are focusing on a particular parade a long time ago. Preachers, I’ve been told since I was in seminary, often struggle with Palm Sunday. I always had fun with it. One year, early in my ministry, I compared Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem with a presidential candidate arriving in Hershey in a smoky Henry J. (Oops, for those of you who were born after 1980 – that was a very cheap car made by the Willys Overland Company that originally made Jeeps.) One year I had a live donkey led down the center aisle of the suburban church I was serving, preceding the choir members in the processional who were stepping ever so carefully behind the farm animal. But, I digress.

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem as celebrated by the typical mainline Protestant Church today is nothing like it was 60 or 70 years ago when many of us were children. We endeavored to

have a taste of that as we began this morning. But, nowadays this pageantry gets relegated to the call to worship, and a festive hymn or two, usually with palms waving awkwardly in the air. By the sermon time in today's church the focus has shifted to the cross as curious combinations of Palm and Passion Sundays are explored.

I think such short shrift is highly unfortunate. Palm Sunday is about much more than a parade. It's about what Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, calls the "livability" of scripture. Here are two disciples, sent into a town where they aren't known, hoping they don't get tarred as horse thieves. Here are crowds, making themselves vulnerable, out ahead of Jesus where there's nowhere to hide. Here is loud boisterous testimony to God's deeds of power, so powerful that it ultimately makes the Pharisees desperate to silence it. Maybe we ought to dwell a little longer on this scene.

Annie Dillard wrote that "Jesus creates his role and then succumbs to it. He understands his destiny only gradually, through much prayer; he decides on it, foretells it, and sets his

face to meet it. On a long journey to Jerusalem, which occupies many chapters of Luke's gospel, he understands more and more. Luke's narrative builds a long sober sense of crushing demand on Jesus the man, and the long sober sense of his gradually strengthening himself to see it, to cause it, and to endure it....In that final long journey to Jerusalem, the austerity of Jesus deepens, his mystery and separateness magnify. The party is over... What awaits him is uncertain, unspecified, even unto the cross and upon it...in this village and that, his awareness becomes stonily clearer."

MaryAnn McKibben Dana, a Presbyterian minister in Washington, DC noted recently that Luke's account curiously speaks of the people waving their clothing and placing their coats and perhaps shirts on the ground in front of Jesus as signs of jovial abandonment with the entire procession. In Luke's gospel there is nary a palm in sight. She muses as to why this event hasn't become "Cloak Sunday" instead of Palm Sunday? That might make for an interesting way to celebrate next year here at FCC, with worshipers marching around, strewing the aisles with new and used clothing for the sake of the poor and as

a way to lift up Christ's coming among us. (Anyway, woe am I for I digress again!)

There's no evidence the people of Jerusalem knew Jesus was coming that day. They couldn't have planned to disrobe for the Messiah. Here comes the King, not on a mighty war horse like some celebrated Caesar of the Empire but on a donkey. His crown will ultimately be one of thorns, not jewels. His kingdom will be marked by justice, not opulence.

Jesus doesn't lead the parade, riding out in front of everyone like a Marshall. He's somewhere in the middle of the marchers, that mix of admirers and the curious. The way Luke tells the story, Jesus may actually be bringing up the rear of the parade. The crowds are going before him calling to all within earshot to join them in this magnificent welcome to the One Who, when he first saw the city, wept over it and wished aloud that even that day the residents knew the way of peace. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you kill the prophets and stone those sent to you; how often might I have gathered you together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you would not!"

All of this brings to mind the words of John the Baptist at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." It took them a while, but here on this day it appears as if the crowds finally are ready to do so. Here, on this day, after three years of preaching, teaching, healing, inspiring, and praying, the people are proclaiming it is wise to follow him! The Pharisees catch sight of this, too. Up to this point they could tut-tut Jesus about his demanding teachings. In the past, they could raise questions about what he was doing, how he was doing it, when he was doing it, and with whom for it was he who was always out in front. Now, they were concerned for it was the crowd that proclaimed the goodness of God and not Jesus. It was a critical mass of the populace that spread their cloaks before this ridiculous rabbi from Galilee. Now, they needed to act with all deliberate haste at all costs to stop the crowd from getting larger and more vocal.

Sometimes we follow Jesus. We see him clearly and know we're on the right path. Sometimes we get out in front. It takes faith to follow Jesus. It takes very deep faith to go ahead of

Jesus into an unknown place. On that day in Jerusalem the crowd exemplified what Eugene Peterson calls “a long obedience in the same direction,” a discipleship that’s oriented toward the reign of God, even when Jesus isn’t out in front, showing the way.

What happened when Jesus went up to Jerusalem for Passover was ultimately less celebrative than first perceived. He wasn’t “passed over” after he walked into the temple and challenged its fiscal practices. He wasn’t “passed over” after two of the four healings attributed to him that week took place on the Sabbath. He wasn’t “passed over” as his words seemingly became more outlandishly harsh and angry than a contemporary presidential primary debate. No, Judas betrays him. The political puppet Herod plays parlor tricks on him; and Pilate mocks him while also having him flogged – this after both rulers find him innocent of all charges against him. Peter denies him. The paid demonstrators call for his blood. And the Roman legionnaires perform their legal duty. Seems that a parade without a permit has always been an unpardonable act.

Yet, I loved the parade. Now that it's over, I stand here beside the road pondering the meaning of all of this as I gaze upon the confetti strewn roadway. Those consigned to cleanup will soon be by to pick up all that has been thrown in the wake of the jubilant crowd. "Hosanna, Hosanna..." they shouted as the major float walked by bearing that singular soul who would eventually withstand the rejection of all: conservative and liberal, fundamental and progressive, revolutionary and collaborative, friend and foe – every one.

I gaze across that centuries laden roadway and I notice a woman, standing alone. She looks grief stricken as she gazes up the way toward the heart of the city. She's been here before, a long time ago, with her husband and their first child. What she senses now is even more disconcerting. She is joined suddenly by another woman. Her dress is not of the first century but of the 16th. She is speaking softly to the older woman. Even from this distance, I hear her words,

“He will have no body but ours
no hands, no feet on earth but ours
ours will be the eyes with which he looks

ours are the feet with which he will walk to do good
to utter words of grace and mercy, or not.”

(Teresa of Avila)

The older woman now lifts her head and smiles as the two
walk slowly arm in arm into the city and I turn to go back home.
Amen.