

“A Tale of Two Parades”  
Luke 19:29-40; Psalm 118:1, 21-24; Philippians 2:5-8  
Palm Sunday, April 14, 2019  
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So—have *you* ever marched in a parade?

...Or perhaps you have ridden in one?

Come to think of it, *I* rode in one once (although, like this parade we just read about, it didn't exactly start out to be one).

It happened one autumn afternoon shortly before my tenth birthday, when the phone rang at our house just as I returned home from school. When my mother answered, a voice from my grandfather's automobile dealership said, “Get Davey down here, he's *gotta* see this!”

Well, “this” turned out to be the first shipment of the 1957 Dodges and Plymouths. (If you don't know what a Plymouth was, ask someone over 40).

And speaking of age, those of you of well, a certain vintage, may recall that '57 was the model year in which Chrysler Corporation brought out those ginormous, goofy *tailfins* that looked (to us, at the time) like something out of a science fiction movie. (In point of fact, tailfins had been around for several years, but nobody had ever seen anything so over the top as this)!

In short order, one of my grandfather's salesmen popped me into the front seat of one of them, and we took it out for a spin. By now, everyone was getting off work for the day, so between the traffic and pedestrians, we found ourselves just inching through the narrow streets of our downtown. Quickly we became the center of attention—grown men running out into the street to call out questions—some about horsepower or sticker price, but mostly demanding to know, “What the heck *is* that thing!?” We became a one-vehicle parade of sorts, with some people actually climbing up telephone poles to get a better look, or racing ahead on foot to alert friends of our approach.

As word reached the soda fountains and malt shops, the high school kids came pouring out, strains of Elvis trailing behind them. The ponytailed girls with their poodle skirts and bobby sox and saddle shoes just swooned over this strange apparition, while the boys in their flat top or ducktail haircuts practically tripped over their own tongues as they drooled over this magnificent machine and fantasized about someday owning one.

The whole drive probably lasted only 15 minutes. But in a world that usually made ten year old kids feel invisible, I suddenly knew what it felt like to be part of something bigger than myself.

Now, I tell you of that little episode, first of all because I hope it provides at least a taste of what it must have felt like to be there on that day of Jesus' little parade, coming into Jerusalem.

How *does* a spectacle such as that just materialize out of nowhere?

And what would it feel like to find yourself caught up in it?

If you were standing there by the side of the road, what sort of longings in *your* heart would inspire you to cheer him on?

Would you climb an olive tree in order to get a better look, or race ahead to alert your friends?

And would you *join* this parade—or wait to check out next year's model when it rolls into town?

But back to that accidental little parade of my childhood: There is a *second*, more important reason that I tell you about it.

It happens that just four months earlier, the biggest parade in the history of that town had taken place—a mile-long 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration, with marching bands and dignitaries coming in from all over the area.

So I'm pretty sure that if you went back there today and checked the archives of the local newspaper, there would be tons of stuff about that big sesquicentennial parade

... whereas there is probably no written record of our impromptu little parade with the 1957 Dodge Lancer.

Yet, to me, there is no question as to which was the more important of the two parades.

But I want to suggest that the *contrast* between those two parades is important to all of us. Because according to biblical scholars John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, Jesus' little parade *also* takes place in the shadow of a bigger, more important procession. (Crossan and Borg, *The Final Week*)

And in this case, it probably happens on the very same day.

The parade that the disciples throw for Jesus enters town from the *east*, coming down off the Mount of Olives .... but coming in from the *west* is the grand spectacle of *Pontius*

*Pilate*, with his horses, chariots and legions, flashing shiny armor and carrying banners of purple, red, and gold.

This is Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea; Pilate, the personal representative of the overwhelming power of the Roman Empire.

(You see, it's the week of the Passover festival, the holiest of Jewish celebrations. And the occupying Romans regard it as the most *dangerous* time of year, because if there are going to be any popular uprisings, this would be the time. So each year at Passover, just to make sure nobody gets any big ideas, Pilate and his Legions march in from the countryside where they have been garrisoned, parading into Jerusalem with a great show of power and force).

Now, somehow our tradition has come to refer to Jesus' little parade as "The *Triumphal Entry*"

... but any triumphal entering on that day belonged to *Pilate*.

What Jesus was doing, when riding on that donkey, was acting out an Old Testament prophecy—a prophecy about a *new kind of kingship*.

And there is probably no clearer way to understand that new style of kingship than to draw your attention to the contrast between those two parades—the parade of Pilate, and the parade of Jesus.

Because the difference between the two gathers up a broad range of choices that confront you and me as we make our way forward in life.

And although we worship *Jesus*, it is probably *Pilate's* parade that you and I understand better.

You see, Pilate's parade is all about the *exercise of power*—getting it, keeping it, and flexing its muscle when necessary in order to maintain things as they are.

Historians call it the *Pax Romana*—the "Roman Peace." Often it seems a bit heavy-handed, but the powers-that-be say it's for the common good.

Keep everyone in their place, and no one gets hurt. God knows, it's just better for all concerned.

And what does it take to be the ones who get to stay in the driver's seat, and decide "who matters" and how things should go? *That's* of paramount importance.

*You* know the drill: here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we still act it out in ways large and small.

Right now, our nation is embroiled in controversy over interference in the last presidential election by a powerful global adversary. And as the world's leading power, we are not used to someone else moving our cheese.

But unless you've been living under a rock, you also know that much of the drama is over *who gets to interpret* what has happened. Whose narrative will prevail as voters decide how we move forward?

And *that* is the essence of power, as Pilate knows it.

But if you fear that you're hearing another sermon slide into politics, relax: politics is low-hanging fruit when it comes to demonstrating how Pilate's mentality dominates our lives.

Truth be told, it operates in much more subtle ways:

Such as certain celebrity parents finding themselves in big trouble legally, for paying hundreds of thousands to get their offspring into elite colleges by fraudulent means.

Or right there in Anytown USA, if the main goal of parenting is to keep up a sparkly façade for the family image.

Or being the kind of workplace supervisor who is preoccupied with one's own advancement and keeping everyone else "in their place."

Or, having just completed that annual celebration of bigtime college basketball known as March Madness, we are reminded that putting hundreds of millions of dollars into recruiting and palatial training facilities is usually done in the spirit of making sure the right team wins.

Ah, but now, as the old saying goes, I have "quit preachin' and gone to meddlin'"—and I bet you're wishing the preacher had stuck to politics after all!

Meanwhile, that little procession coming down off the Mount of Olives features a very different understanding of power. In Jesus' parade, there is no winning or losing—and power is meant to be *shared or given away*, not hoarded.

It assumes that those of us who live by faith are freed to be less concerned about getting what we want—and making sure instead that *all* of us (including the poor, the marginalized, the refugee in our midst) get what we *need*.

In a recent article in *Sojourners* magazine, the great Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann describes this approach as a *new paradigm* of power relations. And the whole church, he says, is invited to live and work in that paradigm. (*Sojourners*, April 2019, pp. 9-10).

What this kind of power does care about is *trying to see as God sees*, and becoming part of a family that exists for human flourishing.

After all, on this day Jesus' life is about to be laid down so that you and I might claim the kind of life he calls '*eternal*'.

Now, I know. I know--all of this may sound hopelessly idealistic, in light of all the messages we receive about how life '*really*' works. And yes, just five days later, Jesus does get himself crucified for this new paradigm of his.

But here is at least one thing that might give you hope and encouragement:

Unlike those two parades of my childhood year of 1956 (where no one would even remember the smaller of the two), we see a reversal in the case of Jesus and Pontius Pilate.

Today, only a few historians and biblical scholars even know about Pilate's big, important, annual demonstration of shock and awe there in ancient Jerusalem at Passover time.

Whereas a sizable portion of the world's population annually celebrates this ragtag little parade that Jesus pulled off that one time for his entrance into the same city on that very same day.

Why? Because we know in our bones that there is something about it that is truer and more life-giving.

And apparently all of Creation knows in its bones, as well. When the Pharisees admonish Jesus to silence his celebrating disciples, he replies, "If they were silent, these very *stones* would cry out!"

Now, I realize--maybe you are someone who came here today *nostalgically*, just to see the children engage in a time of quaint, harmless remembrance with their palm fronds and hosannas.

If so, you may have chosen the wrong Sunday.

Important as it is for our children to re-enact this story, Presbyterian pastor Christine Chakoian asks, "... instead of a sweet children's parade, ... what if we treated this day as the day of protest it really was?" (*Christian Century*, March 15, 2017, p. 19)

Friends, Palm Sunday challenges you to choose:

which kingdom you're going to serve;

which narrative you're going to be fed by;

which kind of power paradigm you're going to live by;

which parade you're going to attend.

So take heart: about all you can do at Pontius Pilate's grand parade is to watch and dutifully applaud, "go along to get along."

But Jesus' little parade? That's one in which you can actually march--and invest your life.