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Matthew 21:1-11

## JOINING THE PARADE

This is indeed a strange Palm Sunday for us. Across the nation, church doors are locked and pews are empty. There will be no little children forming parades down church aisles, no worshipers joyfully waving palm branches from their pews and then bending their palm fronds into crosses instead of listening to the sermon! It is a strange Palm Sunday for sure.

Nevertheless, even though this year we are deprived of our traditional Palm Sunday parades, the biblical story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem still beckons us to join Jesus' parade with our hearts and with our lives. And that is not always an easy choice for us. Because we also witness and experience in our lives other parades that invite our participation. And quite often we are tempted and enticed to join *those* parades instead.

In fact, at the very time Jesus was entering Jerusalem, there was another parade taking place across town. This other parade was not recorded in the Bible but all of those early Christians reading Matthew's gospel would have known about it. It would have been the unspoken story behind the story of Jesus' entry. Palm Sunday is really the story of two parades.

Let's begin, however, with the parade we know best--Jesus' parade. Jesus enters Jerusalem to a warm and enthusiastic welcome. A large crowd greets Jesus with shouts of "Hosanna," which means "save us." And they cried, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" They spread their cloaks and branches upon the ground in front

of him as a way to honor him. Matthew tells us that all this activity fulfilled the Old Testament prophesy, "Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey." Matthew's implication is clear: Jesus is this humble king come to save his people.

But as Jesus enters Jerusalem from the East another procession would have been entering Jerusalem from the West. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, would have entered Jerusalem at the head of an imperial cavalry. It was the common practice of Roman governors of Judea to travel to Jerusalem and be in that city for the major Jewish festivals in order to ensure there was no trouble from their subjects. And as the biblical story tells us, Jesus was entering Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover holiday, a festival that sometimes generated dissention among the Jewish people as it commemorated the Jewish people's liberation from an earlier oppressive empire. Pilate wanted to make sure that none of the Jewish people got any ideas about liberation, and so he comes to ensure a kind of "crowd control" during the festival.

In their book *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan help us visualize what Pilate's entry into Jerusalem would have looked like. They 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." This would have been an intimidating spectacle. And this spectacle also supported an imperial theology. Supporters of the Roman Empire regarded the emperor as divine, even

referring to him as the "Son of God." Pilate's entry would have displayed the power and the status of the king of Rome, the emperor of Rome.

What a contrast we are given between these two parades: Jesus' parade and Rome's parade. Both parades celebrate a kind of power. Both parades celebrate a kind of power. But they have a radically different idea of power. Rome's idea of power is what we see in the world even today: a power that coerces and dominates and intimidates, a power that operates by generating fear, a power that is rooted in greed and selfishness, a power that plays people off one another, a power that divides people, a power that takes, a power that employs revenge and blame.

Of course, we can point our fingers at certain government leaders of the world who fit this definition of power. We see them on the nightly news. But those same forces unfortunately operate in our own lives. They are the forces that enter our hearts and minds when we have conflict with one another, or when we make decisions about how to use our money, or when we absorb the social messages about what paths we should pursue in life, and what makes for a good life or a meaningful life. Rome's version of power is a force to be reckoned with because it still operates in our world and in our lives. And often we fall into its procession. We walk the ways of Rome. We are attracted to the ways of Rome.

Jesus' parade was also a display of a kind of power. It was a display of the power of *love*, God's kind of love. It is a humble, uniting, merciful, compassionate, sacrificial kind of love. And this kind of love is indeed a *very* powerful force to be reckoned with. Jesus' was not simply processing into Jerusalem, you see. He was processing to the cross. What we remember on Palm Sunday is that out of love for us, Jesus processes into

the darkness and death of our lives. He processes into our suffering and brokenness in order to transform us and lead us out of that darkness and into a place of love.

There is a lot of suffering going around right now. We may be personally experiencing suffering. Maybe we or loved ones have become ill with Covid-19. Or we know the hardship of being separated from loved ones. We may be afraid of getting ill. Our lives have been completely altered. We've experienced losses of all kinds--to our freedom and the plans we had for our lives. Then we learn about the hardships faced in hospitals and among medical professionals during this crisis. We hear about deaths and people losing jobs. And as this virus makes its way to very vulnerable nations and populations, to those places with limited medical resources, to refugee camps, we brace ourselves for the suffering that is likely to come.

Many of us here in the United States are not used to this level of disruption and fear and suffering. But here it is, right on our doorstep. And so maybe more than ever, we may find comfort in a Savior who is not afraid to process into our darkness. Hosanna, we cry. Save us! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord to save us.

And so Christ enters our lives on this Palm Sunday, even as we are separated in our own homes, Christ enters our lives as he always does, to save us with his life-giving, powerful love. We are not alone. And we are not ill-equipped for these times in which we live. For Christ *our* king is with us, and he transforms us and empowers us with his love. And he invites us to join his parade.

I've seen his parade taking place in these trying times. And I bet you have too. Here's a Palm Sunday parade for you. Have you seen those stories going around about how some people in these times of social distancing, are celebrating loved ones'

birthdays? People are decorating their cars with balloons and signs and streamers and then they form a parade of cars that drive by the little child's house or the grandmother's house, and they honk their horns and shout out their greetings of love to the person on the porch.

Here's another Palm Sunday parade: the procession of health care professionals who daily enter the hospitals around our nation to care for those so sick with this virus, enduring long hours, insufficient equipment, and risking their own health in the process.

Or the parade of neighbors shopping for one another, and food pantry volunteers, and the procession of phone calls as people check in on one another. Parades of love are needed, especially in dark times. That is what Jesus invites us to be part of on Palm Sunday. He invites us to join his parade of love.

As we celebrate today the king of love over against the kings and forces of this world, I want to invite us to consider joining Jesus' parade in another way. In a few weeks, we will begin receiving the government's stimulus checks. This money is essential for vast numbers of Americans who are indeed suffering economic hardships because of the shutdowns caused by the pandemic. However, there are those among us who may have had the great fortune to *not* have experienced economic hardships. Some of us may have continued to receive an income during this crisis. And so I want to invite those among us who have not known financial hardship or loss to consider giving away some or all of your stimulus check to someone who has experienced financial loss. Of course, you should indeed keep the money and use the money if you need it. That is what it is there for. But if you have known the blessing of having an income in this time of crisis, I invite you to consider giving some or all of it to someone for whom that money

would be a lifesaver. If you don't know of someone who could use it, then let me know and I can connect you with those who are in need. I've spoken with Dr. Myron Glick at Jericho Road Community Health Center and there are many among their staff of more than 300 employees who are in need.

And I would also encourage any of you who are facing financial hardships to let me know of your need so that others can extend the love of Christ through our financial gifts.

We might not be together this year to wave our palm branches. But the parade, the parade of Christ's love still goes on. And you and I can join it.