

PARADE DETOURS

Mark 11:1-11

John Wesley, founder of Methodism, was one of the most brilliant men of the 18th century. He read eight languages, wrote some 440 books and pamphlets, thousands of hymns and had great intellectual curiosity. But not everyone was impressed. One woman wrote to him: "Mr. Wesley, I have been instructed by the Lord to tell you that He has no need of your learning." To which Wesley replied, "Madame, while I have no direct word from the Lord on this matter, I feel constrained to tell you that the Lord has no need of your ignorance, either!" We are ignorant of some of the things that happened that day.

Jesus had walked about 90 miles on foot, and then asked for a donkey to ride into town. We do begin to have an understanding of Jesus' actions when we look to the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus was fulfilling the words of the Hebrew prophet Zechariah (9:9): "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

He fulfilled the words we repeated in the Call to Worship from Psalm 118, "Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest. Open to us the gates of righteousness, that we may enter through them and give thanks. Here is the gate; come, let the righteous enter. Bring your branches to the festival procession. Say to the daughter of Zion, behold your salvation comes. Blessed be the King that comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest." All of those ancient words were fulfilled when Jesus entered Jerusalem that day.

Our town is getting ready for a July 4th parade. The parade theme is: American and All that Jazz. This church will have a float and plans are already underway. Some envision dressing up Dr. Godoy as Betsy Ross and putting her in the back of a truck playing jazz piano, but that remains to be seen.

After this parade there will be a concert on the Village Green and in the evening there will be fire works. Merchants on Main Street and especially the restaurants are getting ready for a grand event. The parade committee will do everything it can to make the parade a success. And part of my

contribution is driving a golf cart up and down Main Street before the parade passing out water to parade participants.

That may not seem like the most glamorous job compared with, say, judging the floats or being grand marshal. But it is better than the job the disciples had: the donkey detail. They found themselves mucking around a stable, looking suspiciously like horse thieves, trying to wrestle a possibly untamed and no doubt balky animal toward the olive groves. The disciples could be punished for taking a colt without authorization. It was the bystanders who told them to take it, not the owner. They might as well have had T-shirts that read “Horse-thieves for Jesus!”

For this they left their honest labor working with fishing nets. The sort of semi-authorized taking of an animal hardly seems like an upgrade. To their credit the willingness of these disciples to obey Jesus was a mark of their commitment. Even as they were basically clueless in understanding where Jesus was heading, they could understand the risk in what they were about to do.

Some scholars have suggested there was not only the procession headed by Jesus on a donkey from the Mount of Olives on the east that day, but also a Roman procession entering from the west, which would have had as a focal point the Roman governor named Pontius Pilate. The juxtaposition of these two processions would have set up quite a contrast.

One came as an expression of political empire and military occupation whose goal was to make sure oppressed people did not find deliverance. It approached the city using horses, brandishing weapons, proclaiming the power of empire. The other procession was quite a contrast, using a donkey and laying down cloaks and branches along the road. The one who was coming in the name of the Lord quietly, but profoundly, proclaimed the peaceful reign of God.

If Pilate’s procession displayed power, violence and the glory of the empire that ruled the world, Jesus’ procession embodied the kind of kingdom that God was ushering in through Jesus’ ministry of healing, his message of good news, his care for the poor and outcast and marginalized and, ultimately, his sacrificial death on a Roman cross.

Such contracts continue through the ages. Almost two thousand years after Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, another visitor came to the city, Germany's last Kaiser, Wilhelm II. His entourage was so grand that he had to have the Jaffe Gate in the old city widened so that his over-sized carriage could pass through. After that parade had ended, someone climbed up and attached a large sign to the gate. The sign read, "A better man than Wilhelm came through this city's gate. He rode on a donkey."

The Gospel narrative tells of the parade and the popularity, but it does not end there. It ends with Jesus and the disciple going back together to Bethany. Jesus walked away from the crowds. He walked away from the place and people of power to a small town with twelve mostly clueless disciples. There is no record of anyone who cheered them on during the procession, anyone who cried, "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!" going back as a disciple.

Maybe we can understand some of this. Up until that point Jesus had taught some profound and inspiring lessons. Jesus had performed startling miracles. People who were hungry were fed. People who were blind could see. People who were crippled stood and walked. There was the time he stilled the storm and the other time he jumpstarted a wedding party by turning water into wine.

Jesus had welcomed in all sorts and conditions of people. Outcasts were restored to the community. Sinners were forgiven. And Jesus stood up to the principalities and powers of that day, the religious establishment in Jerusalem and the political power of Rome. What happened next would be like a politician who makes a stirring speech and offers great hope and promise to grand cheers and applause. Then he adds, "And to do all these things I promise I am going to raise your taxes – a lot." All those who thought this leader had an ability to accomplish everything with magic and not their money began to back away and whisper and began planning to support the opponent.

The parade took a detour. When Jesus stopped providing benefits and started to explain the cost of discipleship, when Jesus stopped with the miracles and talked of the cross, people began backing away. He could not possibly expect that kind of sacrifice from those who follow him, accepting the terrible cost of the Roman cross.

We know that the gospels tell us the story of Jesus birth, ministry, suffering, death and resurrection. The gospels are also the story of how Jesus' disciples just did not get it. They watched Jesus perform a miracle, then doubt his ability to do again what he just did. They helped him feed the 5,000, but had no idea how he will feed 4,000. They saw and believed, but when it mattered, they ran away like scared rabbits.

We have another parade in town. This is one on Memorial Day to thank the people whose sacrifice delivered us from danger. Streets are lined with people who cheer and applaud and thank them. But who stands with these vets the next week when they are ill or homeless and need help? The pageantry is good, but how welcome is the message of the cost they are due in our money and our time?

It is like how churches begin to fill up on Palm Sunday and are packed on Easter Sunday but Maundy Thursday and Good Friday look sparse. Some of it is the time involved and some is the hour, but mostly it is that compared to the joy involved in the Palm Sunday parade and the Easter triumph it is such a downer to have to deal with Jesus' suffering and death, what our discipleship costs us.

There are understandable reasons people detoured off the route of following Jesus to Bethany. There were Roman soldiers everywhere. Some of them would have dressed like Jewish pilgrims and if anyone caused too much of a stir, if anyone was too vocal, if anyone would shout words proclaiming Jesus as king, anyone involved in organizing support for him might meet the soldiers and their swords. There is a very practical reason for discretion, for not following Jesus and the disciples back to Bethany.

Beside we are told Jesus "went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late." When a parade ends we don't just stand there. We don't wait until the bands have packed up and the floats are disassembled before we leave. We leave when the parade ends. We grab the lawn chairs and the children and head to whatever is next. What happens when worship ends? Grab the coat, grab the keys and leave for lunch. Unless you know that the parade is not really the main event. It just announces the beginning.

There was once a little boy who heard the circus was coming to town. He had never seen the circus, but he had heard all about the lions and tigers, the elephants and the acrobats and clowns. So he saved every penny he could find; he ran errands and did odd jobs, and finally, the Saturday morning of the circus, he gathered every cent he had worked so hard to earn and went into town.

As he approached the main street, he couldn't believe his eyes. A marching band was coming right down the center of the street, and behind them was the circus! There were lions and tigers and clowns in funny cars, hopping in and out and turning somersaults. There were elephants with beautiful ladies on their backs, and a man who was swallowing fire.

He stood there dumbfounded. Here was the circus, right before his eyes. He turned to some older boys who were leaning up against the lamppost and said, "I can't believe I've just seen the circus. Who do I pay?" The older boys shot each other a crafty look and said, "Oh, you pay us." So the little boy gave them all his hard-earned money and he went home, thinking he had seen the circus. In reality, he had only seen the parade.

Jesus is not trying to lead us on a parade but trying to lead us all into his kingdom. He was not seeking spectators to cheer him but faithful disciples who will follow him. We know the story of those who shouted hosanna. But something happened after that. The authorities began to complain. Things got a bit dangerous. The fun of a parade quickly faded.

Jesus is not looking for those who just sing a hymn and go home but those who are willing to pay the cost of discipleship. Now is our opportunity to continue to Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, to join the faithful, often not knowing where discipleship will take us, but always trusting who it is that leads us.

April 5, 2009

The Federated Church of Hyannis

Dr. John A. Terry, Pastor