

## ***Which Parade to Choose?***

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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In their book, "The Last Week", theologians Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossman assert that there were actually two parades occurring simultaneously in Jerusalem on this day. From the east, Jesus entered on a donkey. From the west, the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, entered with an imperial guard. "Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus' crucifixion."

This image is a meditation on these opposing processions and the embodiment of power. Pilate processes with a pompous display of armor, accompanied by soldiers. For him, power is displayed by superiority, elitism, and weaponry. Later in the week, he will use his power to satisfy the crowds willing Jesus to be crucified, despite not finding any offense to justify it. He uses his power for violence, to appease the status quo.

Jesus enters the city on a donkey with her young colt in tow. He wears no armour, only soft linens. In this image, I imagine if the composition were expanded, Jesus would be kneeling, humbling himself before his disciples as he washes their feet.

In Jesus' processional, members of the crowd lay down their coats as a display of humility and honor. This foreshadows the way Jesus will take off his outer robe and tie a towel around his waist to wash his friends' feet. Jesus embodies power through a posture of vulnerability, through caring for those who desperately need love.

Which parade you would join in Jerusalem has a lot to say about your definition of power. If you are quick to place yourself in Jesus' parade, I encourage you to pause and consider these questions honestly: When have you aligned yourself with systems or people who have used their power for violence or to uphold the status quo? When have you embodied power through vulnerability and love for your neighbor?

Which parade?

I might quickly answer, of course, that I will be a part of the parade for the humble servant-king, Jesus. But today I am called by faith, you as well, to ask: How do we live out that vision of humility and unconditional love, especially challenging when there is another, more convenient and self-serving way?

Right now, Americans are bracing for an unfortunate first in their history – the first time that a former president will be taken into custody. The anxiety, of course, comes as people in New York and other cities anticipate a very unpredictable, extremist, element among the former president's followers reacting.

There are people clamouring to join that parade, that have little care for the vulnerable, often claiming to follow Jesus, but then acting in selfish ways. Political discourse is always a clash of ideas, and of visions, for how we want our community to look, which reflects our values. We hope, when we try to follow Jesus, that our values align us with the palm parade.

Every year, this day, this coming week, brings with it an enormous swing of emotion in worship and the telling of the biblical Story – the swing from the euphoria and Palms

welcoming Jesus, to the heart-wrenching experience of Jesus at table for the last time with his intimate friends, to friends disavowing Jesus in public, and then Jesus tried and convicted by public opinion. That is a great swing indeed. Where there is desperation – people living in poverty, and having little hope for affordable health care – those conditions of repression nurture political instability, even violence.

Standing at the palm parade – who is Jesus to you, and me? Would we, as many there that day in Jerusalem, expect him to be as King David, a conquering King who vanquishes, smites, fixes the problem of the politics of that time, of our time?

I wonder how they felt, then, as Jesus arrived, no gleaming armour protecting him, no weapons. My hunch is that this is a time when people, ancient and modern, hedge their bets, our bets. Sure, they wave their palms; they do want justice, after all, and for God to turn the systems of power upside down.

But when we cannot see that vision in the immediate future, don't we get impatient, our eyes wandering to someone else who can get the job done quicker, and who tells us what we want to hear? Here on Holy Ground of worship, we need to be honest with ourselves and with our Creator.

How do we stay with the palm parade, and then journey with Jesus after the palms are gone, when the tough spiritual work of Holy Week unfolds? How do we demonstrate our allegiance to Jesus' teaching of unconditional love when we have no energy or will to mend broken relationships, when we often try to avoid loved ones whom we don't like? How do we stop ourselves when life gets busy? How do we stop on our fast-paced path, to notice the beauty of life, as well as the heartbreaking pain of suffering and neglect which is also along our path?

These are central questions that each one of us can ask ourselves as we soon will set down our palm fronds, and hear the familiar stories that need to touch our hearts – Jesus, betrayed, arrested, disavowed by friends, tried, and convicted by the politics of his time?

How will we hear and see those stories echoed in our lives, in our world? You couldn't find a more profound contrast than that of the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, and Jesus. How can we see such contrasts in our lives – self-absorbed parades dripping with power, contrasted with people who come together to care, to heal and instil hope?

In the crowds, there will also be among them those who are desperate and crying Hosanna (translated "Save me!"), some cynical and probably inclined to catch a little bit of hope and inspiration. But if it isn't in a 5 second Tik Tok morsel, then they, we, might just head on over to the other parade.

How do we stay with the parade that will move from Hosanna to Heartache in the course of this week?

Perhaps it comes down to muscle memory – loving, loving, and loving more. I can hear Jesus saying – When you are feeling at risk, lean into love. Amen.