

"Will You Follow?"

"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

It is not by accident that Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Immediately following Simon Peter's declaration that he is *"the Messiah, the Son of the living God"* (Matthew 16:16), Jesus *"began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."* (16:21). He repeats this declaration two more times, including one shortly before he and his disciples enter Jerusalem: *"See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised."* (20:18-19).

But why does Jesus choose to enter Jerusalem in such a dramatic fashion? He could have simply walked through one of the city gates, as he probably had entered other towns throughout his travels. But on this day, Jesus enters the city after having given his disciples explicit instructions as to his mode of transportation:

- "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." – 21:2-3.

This is not simply a matter of personal choice on Jesus' part; to emphasize the fulfillment of Scripture, Jesus has the disciples fetch the two animals upon which he will enter the city (*"The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them."* – 21:7). This method of entrance fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah of a meek king who would not ride on a war horse but on a donkey:

- "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." – Zechariah 9:9.

The Mount of Olives also has great significance in this story, recalling another prophecy of Zechariah in which the Mount is the scene of the fulfillment of God's promises at the end of time: *"On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley; so that one half of the Mount shall withdraw northward, and the other half southward."* (Zechariah 14:4).

Processions through the gates of Jerusalem were not uncommon at the time, but the method that Jesus chooses to enter the city is quite different. Grand processions were one of the tools used by the occupying Romans to demonstrate their might and to remind the people of who was in charge, especially if anyone had any ideas of mounting opposition against their oppressors:

- "Pilate's military procession was a demonstration of both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology. Though unfamiliar to most people today, the imperial procession was well known in the Jewish homeland in the first century... it was the standard practice of the Roman governors of Judea to be in Jerusalem for the major Jewish festivals. They did so not out of empathetic reverence for the religious devotion of their Jewish subjects, but to be in the city in case there was trouble. There often

was, especially at Passover, a festival that celebrated the Jewish people's liberation from an earlier empire." – Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*.

The crowds that lined the streets to watch the Roman processions would not be filled with the joy that most parade watchers might feel; it would be more a sense of fear and despair. Among the crowds might also have been some collaborators, persons who sided with the Romans for their own gain. They were a part of the "whole city" that would respond with turmoil over the entrance of Jesus, as they had been disturbed earlier in Matthew's Gospel when the Magi asked King Herod *"Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?"* (*"When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him..."* – 2:2-3). But the crowds that line the road on which Jesus' procession enters the city recognize that the one who passes before them is the opposite of the Romans who seek to instill terror among the people. These potential disciples pave Jesus' way into the city with shouts of acclamation and with their own cloaks and branches (*"A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road."* – 21:8). Such actions are reminiscent of the jubilant royal entrances of previous kings and leaders of Israel whose entrances were met with jubilation:

- "Take with you the servants of your lord, and have my son Solomon ride on my own mule, and bring him down to Gihon. There let the priest Zadok and the prophet Nathan anoint him king over Israel; then blow the trumpet, and say, 'Long live King Solomon!'" – 1 Kings 1:33-34.
- "Then hurriedly they all took their cloaks and spread them for him on the bare steps; and they blew the trumpet and proclaimed, 'Jehu is king.'" – 2 Kings 9:13.
- "Therefore, carrying ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also fronds of palm, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to him who had given success to the purifying of his own holy place." – 2 Maccabees 10:7.

In their acclamation of Jesus (*"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"* – 21:9), the crowds use words from Psalm 118, the last of the Hallel psalms sung at Passover:

- "Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. WE bless you from the house of the LORD." – Psalm 118:25-26).

"Hosanna" was originally a prayer meaning "save, I/we beseech you," but by the first century it had become a contentless, festive shout, something like a religious "hurrah," with no more literal meaning than "goodbye" (which originally was a prayer meaning "God be with you"). "The one who comes" in Psalm 118:26 had developed eschatological and messianic overtones; the blessing here is applied to Jesus as a royal acclamation (*"For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"* – 23:39).

When Jesus enters Jerusalem, the "whole city" that was accustomed to Roman imperial processions *"was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'"* (21:10), having no previous experience of him. Their response to his appearance is to ask the crucial question that is analogous to Jesus' own question to his disciples:

- "Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they say, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'" – 16:13-15.

The crowds' response is to identify him as *"the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee"* (21:11), the fulfillment of the hope of the "prophet like Moses":

- “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: ‘If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.’ Then the LORD replied to me: “They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.” – Deuteronomy 18:15-18.

Two processions entered Jerusalem on this day we call Palm Sunday. One came with all the trappings of Roman imperial power and grandeur; the other was humble and outwardly unimpressive. The Roman procession was meant to serve as a warning to anyone who might be thinking of opposing the occupation forces; the procession of the one who rides on a simple donkey and colt brings the promise of the fulfillment of God’s promises. The Roman parade was a frequent occurrence meant to instill fear in the populace; while Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday is a once-time occurrence, it brings with it the hope of the everlasting presence of our Lord and Savior in all circumstances of life. Jesus enters the holy city to fulfill God’s promises and to accomplish God’s purpose for God’s people, which will be fulfilled this week when his death on the Cross is met by the acclamation of the Roman centurion that *“truly this man was God’s Son!”* (27:54).

Two parades entered Jerusalem on this day. The question for us is: which one will we follow?

- “Genuine discipleship, following Jesus, means following him to Jerusalem, the place of confrontation with the domination system and death and resurrection. These are the two themes of the week that follows, Holy Week. Indeed, these are the two themes of Lent and the Christian life ... Two processions entered Jerusalem on that day. The same question, the same alternative, faces those who would be faithful to Jesus today. Which procession are you in? Which procession do you want to be in? This is the question of Palm Sunday and of the week that is about to unfold.” – Borg & Crossan.

There is an undeniable attraction in the Roman procession with all of its displays of imperial power and prestige; but those who follow that parade soon discover that all it leads to is enslavement to fear and death. The parade that welcomes Jesus offers none of the trappings of grandeur that the Empire could offer, but it is only by following Jesus that we find forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation, even though that procession will lead us through Gethsemane and Golgotha until it brings us to the Empty Tomb and the good news of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ that is at the heart of our faith.

- “For Christian faith this means that it can no longer understand itself only in the context of its place in world history, and of the history and success of Christianity, but must recall the event in which it originated. ‘The primary existent for faith, revealed only to faith, and, as revelation, the first thing to bring faith into being, is, as far as “Christian” faith is concerned, Christ, the crucified God.’” – Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*.

When we take hold of these palms this morning, we are declaring to all that we have made choice as to which parade we will follow. We have decided to follow Jesus, renouncing allegiance to any principality or power that would demand our loyalty. We are declaring that we will follow Jesus this week in the way of the Cross, abandoning the path of power and prestige that ultimately leads to enslavement, hopelessness, and death. We are declaring that the one who is our Savior is not a mighty king or charismatic leader but *“the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”* The palms we bear are a public declaration of our decision to follow Jesus; if that is not your decision today, don’t take a palm.

- “To bear these palms, however, is to bear the symbol not of victory but of the vanity of human foolishness, the illusion of what passes for victory in this world... They are not signs of triumph, moral merit badges – that they are not. They are not signs even of tragedy, a highly developed force of dramatic but unreal enterprise. They are not signs of triumph or of tragedy, they are signs of suffering,

the suffering of the Savior, the suffering of his people, the suffering of all creation and of us with it. The palms remind us of what the psychologists have just learned: that victory is just the other side of defeat and failure is just the other side of success." – Peter Gomes, "Beyond Tragedy."

Two parades are passing before us this morning. When you take a palm, you are making a decision: that you have decided to follow Jesus.

Will you follow? Amen.