

Parade of Praise, Parade of Pain

Mark 11: 1-11, 15:1-15

Broadview Community United Church of Christ
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Hosanna! Glory to God and to the One who comes riding into Jerusalem. Many of us love Palm Sunday because we love parades and the presence of our children waving their palms. As Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a colt we know this ancient image is connecting Jesus with sacred history and that we are on sacred ground – Christ rides into Jerusalem and into our hearts.

Palm Sunday embodies a heartfelt and honest reflection of the pure joy that celebrations hold. We can easily place ourselves in the midst of the disciples and all of the followers of Jesus gathered there at the gate to Jerusalem. They shout hosannas and pull branches from the trees and take the cloaks off their backs to spread before him. Hosanna to the One who comes in the name of our God.

But under and around this story of glad celebration is the knowledge that those who fear Jesus and plot against him have not disappeared. By week's end, many of those waving palm branches and shouting "Hosanna," will turn against Jesus and join his enemies in shouting, "Crucify him, crucify him." In the church liturgical calendar this day is designated both as Palm Sunday and as Passion Sunday, "passion" referring to the death and suffering of Jesus. Today we hold before us both of these realities: the people on the streets honor Jesus with a *parade of praise*; very soon they will mock and destroy him with a *parade of pain*. To understand this Jesus, the one we believe is the incarnation of God; it is helpful to understand both of these parades.

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Just a couple of years ago, my beloved father celebrated his 95th birthday. It was a day to celebrate, a time to honor the man who had lived such a long time and given so much to so many people. As a pastor he had lived as faithfully as he could, made some mistakes, asked for forgiveness, and tried once again to follow his Jesus. So we gathered with family and friends to mark this special birthday. There were cards, balloons, a cake and candles. It was a celebration of pure love and joy.

But at moments we found ourselves moving from laughter to tears. For we knew this would be my Dad's last birthday and that his death would come very soon. In the midst of the celebration, we paused to acknowledge the reality of the moment, to reflect on what we knew lay ahead for him and all of us who loved him.

At times we wanted to say, let's just be joyful today and not think about the future. But my Dad demanded honesty and because we loved him, we knew we would both celebrate his birthday and walk with him through that week until the end came.

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There was irony at the birthday party for my Dad and there is irony today, because of this other story interwoven with our celebration of Palm Sunday. We watch this parade from a different perspective than those gathered there 2000 years ago, for we know the whole story. We know that while the disciples and other followers of Jesus mark this momentous occasion with singing and joy, there is another group also planning a parade that features Jesus, but instead of praising and honoring him, this parade condemns him and ultimately kills him. The terrible paradox at the heart of Palm Sunday that cannot be escaped is that Jesus is riding toward his death and we are singing, “Hosanna, Loud Hosanna.”

In many ways, this palm parade was an act of glorious defiance and great courage. Jesus knew that there was a price on his head. It would be natural for him to try and slip into Jerusalem in secret through some dark alley or back door. But instead he enters in the most public and, to his enemies, inflammatory way – as the star of a parade! Here is a man marked for death, wanted by the authorities, riding into the city in such a way that many eyes are fixed directly on him. We must acknowledge the sheer courage of Jesus, the open and public statement of his ministry that this parade embodies.

For Jesus rides in on a colt, not a powerful, prancing stallion. He comes riding slowly so the people can see him and touch him. This donkey upon which he sits underscores his statement that he comes not as a conquering military hero but as a ruler of love and peace. It is one last appeal on Jesus’ part – before the hatred that will engulf him, he confronts his followers with love’s invitation.

Jesus comes into Jerusalem and during the week following Palm Sunday his actions and teachings challenge everyone. He challenges the scribes and Pharisees as he names them hypocrites, religious leaders who “lock people out of the kingdom of heaven,” especially those who are poor. “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees,” he proclaims over and over again. He undermines the authority of those in power in the Temple; accuses the Sadducees of ignorance of scripture; predicts the destruction of the Temple itself. What is wrong with Jesus? Doesn’t he know these are the very people who are plotting to destroy him? It is as if Jesus is wearing a large sign around his neck, “Come and get me!” For the supreme irony is that the Jesus whom the crowds welcome on the day of Palms is not the Jesus they actually get that week.

Why does Jesus act this way? Wouldn’t most of us simply soak up the adoration of this parade and then quietly hide out with friends until everything has settled down? But Jesus has a different agenda. From the beginning of his ministry he has been clear that he is here, filled with the Spirit of God, to “bring good news to the poor; proclaim release to the captives and let the oppressed go free.” He is here to proclaim a different way of ordering society and to tell of a God who loves us unconditionally – all of us. But the people of Jerusalem aren’t comfortable with this Jesus who comes to disrupt the status quo. They want him to remain a person they can wave palms over, not someone who challenges authority – even unto death.

And 2000 years later we still aren't comfortable. We rightly love the pomp and joyfulness of a Palm Sunday parade. We find it so much easier to go directly from this triumphal procession to the joyful celebration of Easter. Let's skip the visits to the Temple demanding justice; let's skip the gathering on Maundy Thursday as Jesus shares a meal and that demanding commandment, "As I have loved you, so also you should love one another." Let's skip the betrayal by his friends and most especially, let's skip the pain and grief of Good Friday. Bring on Easter! And I understand the passion with which a friend literally shouts at me, "Don't tell me to go through the challenge and pain of Holy Week. My life is filled with enough pain and grief. I need Palm Sunday and Easter – not Good Friday!"

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And I too want to resist! Given a choice, I would gladly have organized many more birthday parties for my Dad, than hold his hand and walk with him through his dying to the end of this life. But there sits this commandment of Jesus: "As I have loved you, so you should also love each other." So my family and I walked through our own "holy week" with my Dad. There were the last suppers, as he barely had the strength to swallow a bite or take a sip of water. There were the hymns he loved that we sang together. There were his favorite scriptures read, many of which talked of the courage needed in the struggle for justice and peace. And when his end came just five days after his 95th birthday celebration, he slipped into death with a soft sigh. And we knew that as joyful as the birthday celebration had been, his parade of praise, the truly holy moments came as we walked with him through the valley of the shadow of death.

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The power of walking through holy week with Jesus is that we see the love of God in the midst of pain and suffering as well as celebration. When Jesus demands justice in the Temple, when he preaches and teaches love and compassion for the poor, when he moves about Jerusalem challenging the status quo, he invites us to walk with him. It takes courage and trust, it is difficult. But skipping from Palm Sunday to Easter skips the powerful message of our God, that even in the terror and violence of Good Friday, the love of God is grace-filling our lives. We have to be honest and acknowledge that life is never all party, all joyful parade. The people of God have never been totally free from pain and suffering – it is part of life – all of our lives. And while we may struggle with the meaning of the crucifixion, the overpowering fact is that God was as present in the betrayal of Jesus, in his suffering and death on the cross, as he was in the Palm Sunday parade. The wood of the cross in Jerusalem holds our God as much as did the wood of the manger in Bethlehem.

For our God does not disappear at the end of today's parade to emerge again in the event of Easter. And the promise of God's divine love is found not only in our Hosannas or in Easter alleluias, the promise is seen also at noon on Good Friday. For even there, especially there on the cross, God does not abandon the world and the only route for today's parade is through the unrelenting shadow of the cross into the light of the open tomb.

Two parades. One leads us to praise Jesus with public words. One leads us to the foot of the cross. And there, in the midst of suffering and pain, we know a God who is nevertheless present. Here, at the foot of the cross, we see God shoulder our pain and suffering, our guilt and confusion, and offer us the gift of reconciliation. Jesus enters Jerusalem and love breaks the bonds of death. In the face of that mystery we sit in stunned and awed silence. In the words of the old hymn, this “love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.” Amen.