Will You Join the Parade?

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Matthew 21:6-11 — 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. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Many of you are familiar with Bordentown's Halloween Parade. I experienced it for the first time this past October. The weather was perfect, if you remember. Robert and I sat on our front porch, ate some snacks, and watched all of the floats go by. Of course, we were delighted by the costumes, the music, the dancing, the old and the young alike marching together, just having a good time. And that's what most parades are for, right? Bringing people together, spreading fun and happiness all around.

Not all parades are so light-hearted, though. Some parades bring certain goals or causes into the merriment, and those goals or causes may incite controversy, may not be welcomed by all. Two years ago, I attended Nashville's Pride Parade with my sister Sarah, and for the most part we had a grand time, but at the end of the day, as we were leaving, a man with a megaphone pointed right at me and yelled, "Repent, you filthy dog, or you'll burn in hell." Some people just live to rain on your parade.

Our story this morning, in which Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last time in his life, may look, at first glance, a lot like our town's Halloween Parade. The image of the donkey may seem cute and quaint to us, waving the palm branches sure is fun, and the crowd's shouts of "Hosanna!" sound pleasant to our modern ears. By now, centuries of tradition surrounding Palm Sunday have passed onto us a gleeful, festive, sunny-day parade. And really, I like it — it's nice for us to have a bright spot before the storm on Friday's horizon.

But while there's plenty of glee and festivity here in our text, there is also plenty of controversy. When we pick up those branches and cheerfully wave them, we may be picking up more than we bargained for. According to many biblical scholars, our story here is not just a parade, but also a rally, a protest, street art, and even a comedy show.

There are at least two layers of meaning to what Jesus is doing in this text. Let's call the first layer "king of the Jews" and the second layer "satire of the empire." First, in Matthew's eyes, when Jesus rides into Jerusalem, he is playing the part of the ancient Hebrew kings, who for centuries before Jesus had processed into the royal city of Jerusalem in this way — with the colt,

the fanfare, and so on. In our first reading, the first five verses of Matthew 21, Matthew quotes the Old Testament book of Zechariah, written centuries earlier, describing just such a procession. Zechariah speaks of an Israelite king who will come into Jerusalem, triumphant yet humble, powerful yet peaceful. And as Matthew tells it, Jesus *is* that king — a righteous, divinely appointed leader of the Jewish people. And in our story, those people surround Jesus with shouts of "Hosannah" — a term of praise in Hebrew that originally means "Save us!" As it turns out, Jesus will lead and save them in ways radically different from every other Hebrew king and every other worldly power.

Speaking of worldly powers, on to the second layer of meaning. You know, the crowds in Jerusalem who are welcoming Jesus already have a king: his name is Caesar. More specifically, these crowds already have Roman politicians, representing the emperor, who are tasked with ruling over them. Here in Jerusalem, the highest such representative is Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. And in fact, when Jesus processes into Jerusalem, he isn't only playing the part of the ancient Hebrew kings; he is also playing the part of Pontius Pilate. Roman dignitaries like Pilate would have rode into Jerusalem in this way as well — more than likely, on a stallion, instead of a donkey. And they would have foot soldiers and weapons and banners and drums and all sorts of things that showed the Jewish people, "We're the conquerors here. We're the ones in charge."

And it gets even more interesting: our story in Matthew occurs just as Passover was beginning. Passover is the Jewish holiday that commemorates the exodus, the Hebrew people's liberation from their Egyptian slave-masters. Every year, during this holiday, the population of Jerusalem ballooned, as Jewish worshippers from all over came with religious zeal and nationalist fervor. In Jesus' day, when the Jews were under not Egyptian rule but Roman rule, Passover was a politically explosive time. And because of this, every year, when Passover began, Pilate and his Roman troops would process into Jerusalem, reminding everyone of the imperial power, and then they would bunker down in the city, ready to keep a rebellious people in line. Pilate and company would have entered Jerusalem from the west, since their base was on the western coast of Palestine.

Now, around the same time as Pilate is processing into Jerusalem from the west, Jesus and his gang of followers are processing into Jerusalem from the east. Instead of riding a stallion, Jesus is riding a random donkey he borrowed. Instead of weapons and banners, the crowds are waving just palm branches — which are a well-known symbol of Judea, the territory in which Jerusalem is located, and also a well-known symbol of military victory. So, the crowd's shouts of "Hosanna" aren't just about Old Testament prophecies and Jesus being the symbolic king of the Jews; those shouts are also about creatively protesting the imperial power in their midst. It's a counter-procession. It's political satire. It's playful, it's subversive, and undoubtedly it got the Romans' attention.

Now, when Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time in his life, he wasn't only trying to criticize and lampoon the Roman empire, and we know this because of where Jesus' procession ends. In the verses following this morning's passage, we read that Jesus rides that donkey straight to the

Jewish temple (not to the Roman base), and when he goes into the temple, what does he do? He turns over a table or two. So, Jesus is speaking prophetic critique not just to political power, but also to religious authority. In this final week of his life and ministry, Jesus is making all sorts of enemies at an alarming rate. Within a handful of days, the Roman imperial forces will nail him to a cross, because they are fearful that he might start an insurrection, and the religious leaders of Jesus' own faith will heartily endorse the execution, because Jesus has disrupted religious norms and challenged religious institutions.

But we'll save that for Thursday and Friday. For now, friends, as we celebrate Palm Sunday, and as we rightly enjoy our traditions surrounding it, let us remember that the story out of which these traditions come is not about a simple, sunny-day parade. When the crowds were waving those palm branches for the prophet Jesus, it wasn't as if they were gleefully marching down Farnsworth.

As I reflect on the Palm Sunday story and on Palm Sunday traditions, I am reminded of several things regarding tradition in general — both the traditions of congregations and the traditions of individuals, the norms, values, and routines of our lives. This morning, I am reminded that our traditions shouldn't always be stiff; sometimes, they should be playful. Our traditions shouldn't always be anodyne; sometimes, they must be prophetic. And our traditions shouldn't always be soothing or tranquilizing; sometimes, they should get our attention, get under our skin, give a little shake to the powerful and the comfortable.

Today, you picked up and waved a palm branch. What is God asking you to pick up and wave tomorrow? Amen.