

“Parading to the Cross”

Palm Sunday, April 13th, 2014

Preached at Trinity Lutheran Church in Eau Claire, Wisconsin

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There are not many things that draw people in like a good parade. Parades are full of excitement, and spectacular theatrics, with floats, bands, old cars, fire trucks, and clowns. Parades bring in the crowds. Certain times of the year come to mind when I think of parades: Macy’s parade on Thanksgiving, with the big balloons and Santa at the end. The Rose Bowl Parade on New Year’s Day, with the Badger Band often playing in it. 4th of July and the many local parades that happen in and around us. Homecoming parades and displays of school and class spirit. All these share in that they are about showing off a little bit of who we are, what we find to be important. These parades are full of pomp and circumstance, meant to wow and celebrate.

And often in our parades, we have people of prominence who take part in them. They are our celebrities, people of some sort of power and prestige or accomplishment. The big national parades bring in headliners to perform and sit on floats, trying to raise their profile and do some advertising. But even our local parades involve local celebrities: politicians, princesses, and other esteemed members of the community. Parades provide a platform, a place where people are sure to be seen, with a built in audience. It is a prime place for celebrities and power players to show off, and we the people enjoy watching them.

Especially when they fall. Boy, do we like watching them fall. What is better than someone famous? It is someone famous who makes a mistake, the bigger the better, to fill our newspapers and blogs and quench our thirst for gossip. We become obsessed with their mistakes, getting sucked into the tabloids, rumors, and drama that come with their destruction. One can picture numerous athletes, movie stars, and politicians, all who have had some sort of fall or made a giant mistake or two in the recent past. And we are drawn to the spectacle of their falls as much as we are drawn to the spectacle of a parade. We latch on to stories of the powerful and famous and their downfalls. Something about them becomes almost parade like. An event that we have a hard time turning away from, and in turn we contribute to their downfall by feeding the beast.

We began today’s worship with a royal parade. A parade for Jesus, full of pomp and circumstance. So moved are the crowds at his arrival, so hopeful are they for what he will bring, that they throw their cloaks and palm branches across the road to soften and spruce up the route for Jesus and his donkey. And they shout praises, and are filled with joy. I can only imagine what their hopes were when Jesus - the Jesus who had been profoundly teaching them, healing them, performing miracles, who truly had to be from God - when this Jesus came to the royal city. This is the same Jesus who they were beginning to call Messiah and King and Son of David. I bet you many of them were hoping and expecting for this King, this Messiah, to come in and clear house. To come and call down the armies of God and start destroying their enemies, especially the big bullies on the block, the Romans. They were expecting to be liberated. That Jesus had come to bring God’s reign into the world through power and force.

But this King came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. Not a warhorse, or a chariot. A donkey. A work animal. A gentle, stubborn beast of burden. Not just a donkey, but also bringing along a donkey's baby, too.

That should have been a big clue to the crowd that something was up. Something was up with this Jesus fellow. Something very different than what they were expecting.

Others had claimed to be the Messiah before, offering promises and grand claims, and had proven to be no such thing. Yet the hopes and dreams of the people of God remained high when Jesus arrived. Maybe this time God will act! You could feel their excitement. And Jesus' disciples were caught up in this excitement. How cool, they must have thought! This is awesome. Which is kind of surprising when you think about it, because Jesus had repeatedly told them he was going to be killed in Jerusalem, yet the disciples don't seem to remember this because of the excitement of the crowd as Jesus entered the city. They must have felt like pretty big deals as the crowds cheered Jesus' and treated him like a king.

Palm Sunday starts with glamour and celebrity, but then things change. The parade ends. And reality sets in. Palm Sunday, while being a day of celebration of the King entering the royal city in a parade, is also the beginning of the fall of the one we proclaim as King. Jesus does not behave the way that the crowds, or disciples, or authorities expected. And they turn on him. They turn on him because they don't get what they want. As we end worship today, we will get a hint of that. A glimpse of this downfall, and we cannot turn away from the fall of our King. We will start the wheels in motion of all that will happen to Jesus this next week.

Palm Sunday takes us from praise and adoration to betrayal and desertion. We know that the very crowds who shouted "Hosanna" will yell "Crucify him." Jesus will be betrayed by one of his inner circle. His disciples will desert and deny him when things get tough. The authorities and religious leaders, annoyed by this truth telling prophet, will throw a bogus trial, and sentence him to death.

This story of Christ and Christ's followers isn't an outdated story. This is our story. These people who surround Christ are us. And we fail to live up to God's expectations of us. We fall short. We give up on God when things don't go how we think they should go. We desert Jesus when our faith becomes too uncomfortable or a struggle. We don't like being made aware of our own selfish and sinful ways. We place tradition and order before grace and justice. We are the ones who shout 'Hosanna' only to insist a day later that we should get rid of this Jesus character.

And still, we have hope. We have hope because God doesn't work like we work. God's ways are different. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord we shout to Jesus today. Indeed.

I invite you to join Jesus in his parade this Holy Week, as he walks through the familiar scenes of this week. From the Last supper on Maundy Thursday, to his trial, crucifixion, and death on Good Friday, to the divine mystery and glory that awaits us Easter morning. Walk with Christ this week, and experience God's way of love and redemption for us and all the world. It truly is

something we didn't expect. But it is something that is glorious, humbling, and amazing. It is something that tells us how great our God's love is for us. Amen.