



The Promise of Another Way

Mark 11:1-11

Rev. Jenny McDevitt

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This is the week that defines the world. This is the week we remember God's most redemptive act. The week we remember all the ways we have gotten things wrong, and the week God continues to show us how everything might be made right again. It all begins today. With a parade.

I used to live in a city routinely overwhelmed by parades. The Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, the St. Patrick's Day Parade, the Puerto Rican Day Parade, the parade that is the New York City marathon, even the line outside of Absolute Bagels, where the best bagels in the city are made, some days, that could be considered a parade, too.

On my worst days, I was weary of the parades. They are a bit of a pain. An inconvenience. They block the streets and slow down the sidewalks, often on Sundays, making it difficult for church members to get to worship and making it difficult for me to get home afterwards.

But on my best days, I could see that the parades — any of them, all of them — shone like a bright light on a cold and cloudy day. Because if you give up trying to actually get somewhere, and just let yourself be swept up in it all, those parades become demonstrations of hope. There is joy and laughter and high fives among friends and there is kindness shown and directions given to strangers. Terrence, one of the homeless men I passed at my corner every

morning and every evening, always said parade days were his favorite. "Everyone is more generous," he said. "I never get as much to eat as I do when the parades are in town. Parades put people in a good mood, and when people are in a good mood, they share more."

There really is something about parades. Among the floats and the signs, the shouts and the pictures, more often than not, there's a palpable sense of goodwill. Of shared humanity. Of hope. I find that to be true anywhere there's a parade — not just in New York City.

On the first Palm Sunday there was a parade. Actually, there were two parades. One, we just read about. A parade with the disciples first tasked with donkey delivery, so that Jesus, Christ the King, can ride into Jerusalem on the humblest of creatures, one slow step at a time, as the crowd throw off coats and cloaks to cover the ground ahead of him, shouting, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

That crowd, they are shouting praise. They are shouting and singing praise that comes from their finest songbook, the book of Psalms. Psalm 118 says, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" — but the crowd, knowing full well the proper lyrics, adds something. They add, "Blessed is the coming kingdom!" They know he is the one who will reign in that kingdom, that he is the one who

will usher it in, and they proclaim it with tattered cloths and tree branches, as he comes in riding on a colt, on a donkey. It is a strange and humble parade, but it is full of hope.

Now, according to Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, another parade took place that very same day. This second parade isn't mentioned in scripture, but it is mentioned in several historical sources. This is one of the times we need to put scripture in conversation with other writings from the time.

Jesus' parade enters Jerusalem from the east, but on the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate enters Jerusalem with every sort of pomp and circumstance. His is a parade not of hope, but of hostility.

You see, it was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year, and it was standard practice for Roman rulers to be in Jerusalem for major festivals — not because of their desire to worship, but because of their need for control. They were present in case there was trouble. After all, Passover celebrated the Jewish people's history of liberation from their oppressors in Egypt. Roman rulers certainly didn't want anyone to get the idea that it was time to be liberated again, this time from the empire.¹

So "imagine [that] procession's arrival in the city. [It is] an [overwhelming display] of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. [And] the sounds [matched]: marching feet, creaking leather, clinking bridles, beating drums."²

Two parades, coming at each other from opposite sides of the city, one proclaiming the kingdom of God and the other proclaiming the

power of empire. It stands to reason that eventually they will run into one another. But their inevitable collision is about so much more than geography. Their collision — their collision of theology and ideology — well, that's what leads to the cross.³ When hope is met with hostility, eventually, something's gotta give, because the two simply cannot exist together.

Now I have to tell you, I've long known there were two parades that day, but for most of my life, I assumed they only took place at the same time because of Passover. That both of them marched that day because of that day's meaning, that each parade's planning and motivation was wholly independent of the other. That it was a calendar-driven overlap, nothing more. But that's not the case.

Pilate's parade is all about power, about how he and his closest confidantes have all of it, which means none left over for anyone else. And Jesus knows that parade was coming. Because it happens with every festival. Jesus knows that parade was coming, and so he arranges for a parade of his own.

If I understand all of this, scripture and history alike, Jesus' procession deliberately counters what is happening on the other side of the city. His parade is the embodiment of an alternate vision, a vision of the kingdom of God, here on earth. And the crowd that lines the streets — they, too, are making a choice. Because they, too, know what is happening on the other side of the city. They have seen it all before, every festival day: the blatant demonstration of hierarchy and the ugly assertion that they are less than and the not-so-subtly-implied violence of punishment for any who dare think differently. It is nothing less than tyranny, even if it is dressed up in its fanciest clothes. And knowing his time is limited, Jesus

¹ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, page 2.

² Borg and Crossan, page 3.

³ Borg and Crossan, page 2.

knows it was time to take his vision for the world to the streets.

Now here is what gives me pause, every time I think of this story: Jesus doesn't stop Pilate's parade. He could. But he doesn't. He simply offers an alternative. That was always his way, and it is still his way today. Not to destroy the ones he knew would destroy him. Not to counter violence with more violence. Rather than obliterate the powers of Rome, Jesus instead presents, yet again, the kingdom of heaven. He reminds everyone — the powerful and the peasants alike — that there is always another way for those who choose to follow it.

Of course that's what Jesus does. After all, God so loved the world — the whole world. Jesus came not to destroy anyone, he came to redeem everyone — even those who would do the worst to him. Jesus' alternate parade, Jesus' alternate way for the world, it was not accidental and it was not coincidental.

Do you know the full story of Rosa Parks? The way I learned the story as a child, Ms. Parks sat down on a bus and refused to get up simply because she was tired. It had been a long day at work, and she needed to stay off her feet.

That's not the whole story. Ms. Parks was part of a network of civil rights leaders who came together four months before she kept her seat on that bus. Together, they thought through what would happen if she refused to get up when asked. They thought through the legal implications and the safety risks and the moral imperatives, and when Rosa Parks got on the bus that day, there were others in her network preparing to spread the word of what was about to happen. They were literally waiting in offices, ready to start making copies of flyers, telling the story as soon as she was arrested.

When Rosa Parks sat down and remained sitting down, make no mistake. It was a careful, intentional, pre-meditated choice. Later, she would write, "I was not tired physically [that day], or no more tired than I

usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was 42. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in."

The crowds that lined Jesus' parade are tired, too. Tired of the other parade and everything it stands for. It is time for a change, and Jesus always knows what time it is. And so, carefully, deliberately, with advance planning and delegated responsibilities, Jesus offers an alternative way of being for those who are tired of the way things are.

That is what he does on that first Palm Sunday, but it is what he does all throughout his ministry, and it is what he will continue to do all throughout this Holy Week ahead. I know that in recent weeks, I have harkened back to earlier parts of Jesus' life, earlier parts of his story, over and over again. But that's because his life, his ministry is so astonishingly consistent. We put so much emphasis on this last week, but his message has been the same since the very beginning.

He took gallons of water, and turned them into gallons of wine.

He took withered limbs, and turned them into a healthy arms and legs.

He took ostracized individuals, and turned them into accepted members of the community.

Now, he takes a parade touting the imperial powers that be, and replicates it on the other side of the city, turning it into a parade touting the power of the kingdom of God.

Before long, he will take the cross, an instrument with a long history of violence and hatred and oppression, and turn it into the ultimate instrument of redemption.

In so doing, he does again what he has been doing his whole life: he takes the world, and, person by person, circumstance by circumstance, conversation by conversation, decision by decision, he takes the earth and everything in it, and offers us another way. He

offers the kingdom of heaven to any who have ears to hear and eyes to see.

Thinking about the entire scope of Holy Week, author and theologian Kathleen Norris wrote, "[All of this] reminds us that our world can turn on a dime. That sudden changes in our circumstances can take us straight from praise to lament. But in exercising our God-given imagination, [especially on Palm Sunday], we can allow Jesus to help us turn our most painful lament into songs of [unending] praise."

The world can turn on a dime. There are two parades marching through the world today. Which one will you turn and follow?