

“Two Processions” (Palm Sunday) sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian Church 3/16/08

Text: Matthew 21:1-12 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘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.’ This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” 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.”

TWO PROCESSIONS entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession.

We have just participated in the better known procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, accompanied by his closest disciples, collecting followers as he went. This gangly gaunt rabbi, seated on donkey with a foal trotting behind, his feet barely skirting the ground, led a parade that gathered steam as it went along. People poured out of village houses and jumped up from campsites on the outskirts of Jerusalem to join the parade. Young and old cut branches off the trees and dropped them in front of him, offering their cloaks as a more comfortable saddle. There was laughter and there was joy and there was hope. And there was community.

On the opposite side of the city, another procession was led by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. This one is lesser known to us, but would have been quite familiar to the first century homeland. The Governor came up from his palace in coastal Caesarea, 60 miles to the west, as he did for all the Jewish festivals-- not out of reverence for the religious devotion, but to be prepared in case of trouble. Passover was always a particularly edgy time, with thousands of people not only flooding the city, but also celebrating the Jewish people's liberation from an earlier empire. The massive display of military power was intended to reinforce and emphasize the relationship between occupier and occupied.

Pilate headed a visual panoply of cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. The sounds were of marching feet, creaking leather, clinking bridles, beating of

drums. And amidst the swirling of dust, there were the eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful.

Procession, and counter-procession. Parade and counter-parade.

Jesus came in from the Jordan Valley and the direction of Jericho, the original route into the Promised Land. He led a political protest march characterized by folks shouting "Hosanna" which means "Please, Save Us!" Save from what? Why, perhaps from the unending threat presented by the Roman Empire and its brutal occupation? These were country people; farmers and artisans; the rural populace; primary producers of the wealth which resided in the cities, in the hands of their merchant employers and elite rulers. These were Jesus people.

They called him "Son of David" and shouted "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." And why not? These Jewish families raised in the oral traditions of the Scriptures would have recognized the parade of Jesus as a deliberate fulfilling of the prophecy from Zechariah. The presence of both a donkey and a colt would have pointed them to the rest of the Zechariah passage. The coming king "will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations."(9:10)

The palm parade deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city. I remember when Jimmy Carter was inaugurated. In the parade he caused absolute consternation when he skipped the limo ride and walked down Pennsylvania Avenue. He was making a statement, about who he was, what he wanted to be and do. On Palm Sunday, Jesus was making a statement.

Pilate's procession embodied the power, the domination, the violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus procession embodied an alternative vision, a kin-dom where there are no enemies, only family; where there are no blind or lame, only those made complete by his coming; there is no death, only life together. Banishing war and commanding peace to the nations, he would become a king of peace.

The two parades intersected at the temple. Pilate's veered up the hill toward the Antonius garrison where the troops could look down on the Temple and its courtyards. Jesus proceeded straight into the outer Temple yard and cried out: "My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers!" His parade followers watched as trading tables were overturned, sacrificial birds went flying, and the merchants fled. Then this rabbi calmly turned and began healing the blind and lame. The Gospel tells us that the children were still outside, calling, chanting, "Hosanna ! Son of David!" The clash of systems was in place. Even the Jewish priests were caught in it, for they owed their allegiance to Rome -- only by the good will of their occupiers could the temple system survive. Yet, they could not act while the crowd was singing praises.

The imperial militia settled into its familiar garret, immediately posting extra guards and dispersing others to patrol the streets. But Jesus was on the move.

Up until now Jesus' ministry was mostly one of grace, of healing and teaching. But now, all you find is a persistent call to commitment. Indeed, in all four Gospels, after the entry, there was not one recording of a miracle.

The first thing Jesus does the next morning is to stop by a fig tree. This tree produces no fruit, and Jesus curses it, withering it-- because. Jesus demands fruitful committed lives.

The Gospel of Matthew describes Jesus' own private parade as it continues over the next few days. He went frequently to the temple to teach. He confronted materialism, religious hypocrisy, loyalties to false gods, inauthentic living. He lamented Jerusalem, warned the people, and exhorted them to faithfulness. He emphasized that actions speak louder than words. He said, "God's realm will come to those who produce the fruits in God's vineyards"

He told stories, lots of stories. He told dangerous parables ---how the son of the owner of a vineyard was murdered by wicked tenants, how a king seated beggars at his banquet. And when the authorities asked him directly about his loyalty to Rome ("Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?") he wiggled free, with a riddle ---"Give to the emperor things that belong to him, and give to God what belongs to God!" And he spoke of love. "Love God and love one another" he said, "this is the greatest commandment."

Four years ago there was parade up to city hall. Exuberant same-gender couples lined up for blocks, waiting to be legally married. What a joyful parade it was, with flowers and tears and love and rejoicing. But those gay and lesbian couples were well aware of the trials ahead in this homophobic and reactive world; they well know the difficulty of maintaining a faithful covenant relationship in a world of persecution. They were ready to negotiate the coming years of legal appeal and social ridicule.

This week there will be a parade to Civic Center -- a march of solidarity, marking 5 full years since the bombs started falling in Iraq. Instead of palms there will be banners and signs; and the hosannas will be cries for a better, more peaceful, more reasonable world. We have seen our share of Pilates and Herods. Our government seems convinced that it can triumph over any country that stands in its way. But rather than celebrating this on-going war, we will lament the suffering and violence in Iraq. And in Afghanistan and in Iran and Pakistan. We will repent of our failure to fully live the teaching of Jesus to be peacemakers.

In the church we claim and explain that every Sunday is Easter Sunday; that every Sunday we worship the risen Christ! But I wonder if all too often, every Sunday is closer to Palm Sunday: full of hope and well-intentioned emotional swelling, brimming over with victorious possibilities, but also carrying within it the inevitability not only of Jesus' death but also our own -- and the awful human potential for doing evil.

After all these years, we the people, murder our babies, maul our neighbors, strap suicide grenades to our bodies, drive jet planes into tall buildings. We put honest immigrants out of work. We refuse to cut gasoline emissions. We surprise ourselves with the evil we can inflict. Yet, like the Palm Sunday crowd in the movies, "Jesus Christ, Superstar" we still sing, "Christ, you know I love you. Did you see, I waved?"

Matthew's palm parade reminds us that knowing the truth is not the same as doing the truth. Matthew's gospel tells us how the cheering stopped when Jesus entered the temple and turned out the money changers. It stopped when Jesus started talking about the cross and about commitment. It stopped when Jesus started making demands.

The palms we hold in our hands are commitment to stand against the forces that oppress human life. They are a statement of solidarity with those who find themselves on the periphery. They are a challenge to identify our own oppressions, our own peripheries, and turn toward Jesus for bread and light and justice and freedom. We must not only stand with our GLBT brothers and sisters, we must sign petitions and talk to legislators

and both enable and even perform those marriages.

This fifth anniversary of the war is not only a time to meant, but a the time for Christians to rededicate ourselves to the biblical vision of a world in which nations do not attempt to resolve international problems by making unilateral preemptive wars on other nations. Given the toll that war has taken in our violence torn world, we must recommit to the arts and skills of conflict resolution and a new international approach to just peace-making

Hold up your palms! Whose hands are holding those branches? Hold out your hands...there they are...there are the palms Jesus really wants us to raise... Raise your palms, stretch them out to the world in his name, to offer all the love and grace and commitment he has given you...Offer your palms, your hands, in service, in commitment.

Which parade will you choose to follow? The world's way, the way of hierarchy and militia and status quo? Or the way of the cross?

Take up the cross, my friends. A new parade, an Easter parade, awaits ahead . The road may be hard. But the crowds called out "Hosanna, save us." He will.

Amen