

The Two Parades

Text - Mark 11:1-11

A sermon by Rev. Benjamin Broadbent

Preached on Palm / Passion Sunday - April 5, 2009

A reading from *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*, by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan:

Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year. In the centuries since, Christians have celebrated the day as Palm Sunday, the first day of Holy Week. With its climax of Good Friday and Easter, it is the most sacred week of the Christian year.

One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class. They had journeyed to Jerusalem from Galilee, about a hundred miles to the north, a journey that is the central section and the central dynamic of Mark's gospel. Mark's story of Jesus and the kingdom of God has been aiming for Jerusalem, pointing toward Jerusalem. It has now arrived.

On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus's procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus's crucifixion.

I.

One great thing about living downtown is that we get to walk to all the parades.

Parades are exciting. Parades happen at the center of things. They cause crowds to gather. Parades draw people's attention to an event or a theme. Parades elevate and demonstrate sets of values. Parades build and define community. Depending upon who is organizing the parade,

limits are set upon who can and who can't participate, upon what is and what is not permissible expression.

Consider the St. Patrick's Day Parade of 2007 when a group protesting U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were dragged out of the street right in front of our church. Many parades leave onlookers with a sense of divided loyalty. My family attended the Veteran's Day parade last November. When the World War II vets walked by, my heart warmed with a memory of and appreciation for my grandfather and those of his generation who served. I felt sick when I heard voices around us said "ooh, cool!" An assault vehicle with a huge machine gun on it was going by. It was painted blue with red and yellow flames to look like a hot rod. A killing machine painted to look cool. Killing made cool. I tried to distract my 3 year old: "Oooh, cool, look at the horses."

II.

The Gospel of Mark has been called a passion narrative with an introduction.

The story of the events in Jerusalem that lead to Jesus' death are clearly Mark's central concern. The Palm Sunday procession, the story we've entered today, marks the beginning of Jesus' time in Jerusalem.

You'll remember that Mark's is the shortest of the four gospels and that scholars hypothesize that it was the first to have been written even though it appears second in the New Testament's order. Mark's Gospel moves quickly. It presents a Jesus who is on a mission. Trouble is brewing in Mark's account and conflict seems inevitable. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus' identity is elusive. Jesus keeps telling people not to talk about what they've seen him do and what they've heard him say. The news gets out anyway. The good news, Mark seems to suggest, is uncontainable. To summarize, in Mark's gospel, Jerusalem is crucial, conflict is inevitable, and the good news is like water spilling out of a hoisted fishing net.

If Mark's Palm Sunday account seems scarcely discernible from those of the other gospels, it is because they used Mark's account to write their own, using most of it as is and adding details where appropriate. But Mark's gospel retains a few distinctive elements, one of which I think is astoundingly interesting. Mark's gospel has sometimes been called the postmodern gospel because its sparse narrative reveals just enough to tell

a story that is filled with shattered expectations and irony. Notice what happens after Jesus enters Jerusalem in the Palm Sunday procession. Notice where he goes. He goes to the temple. Trouble is brewing. A conflict is inevitable.

Two parades collide in the city of Jerusalem. Something monumental is supposed to happen. Instead, in Mark, Jesus goes to the Temple, looks around at everything, and, as it was already late, retires to Bethany for the night. One can almost sense a yawn in the middle of verse 11: “Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, (yawn) as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.”

III.

“What does it mean for us that, in Mark, Jesus is a figure who not only shatters our expectations, but even disappoints them?” Is this not the source of great despair in our life as the church, even as individuals? Are we not often disappointed that God does not intervene more dramatically in the events of our personal lives and in the life of the world?

I am mindful that the shooting at Columbine High School happened 10 years ago this month, on April 20. This past week, 13 people were killed by a shooter at an immigrant aid center in Binghamton, New York. Did we not ask in 1999 and do we not ask now, “Where is God?” Very often, I sense that many people, including many Christians, perhaps the majority, are not aware that these questions are at the *center* of the accounts of Jesus birth, life, death, and resurrection. “Where is God when we need him?” is not a question to which Mark is naively unaware. Rather, this is exactly the question he is addressing. And he does this not by offering pat answers or philosophical formulations meant to satisfy the rational mind.

Mark, like the poets and prophets of the Old Testament, knows that evil, sin, and suffering cannot be surmounted, made more palatable, more acceptable, with explanation. He answers the question, “Where is God?,” by telling a story, and the story he tells remains our story today.

To summarize:

God, the sovereign creator of the universe, seeks relationship with creation and partnership with creatures, specifically humans. The

freedom that allows authentic partnership also permits humans to choose primary relationship with elements of creation that are, by nature, less than God, which humans often do. God, in an act that establishes humans as creation-partners once and for all, enters history in the life a person, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus embodies the full power and compassion of God, and shows us the model of what it means to be fully human. Jesus teaches people about God's kingdom, God's dream, God's joy-filled parade. Jesus heals the sick, the unclean, the misunderstood, who have been ostracized from full participation in society. Jesus confronts empire head on, confronts religious and civic authorities who, through violence and coercion, place themselves in the position of judge, a position that belongs to God alone. This confrontation leads to conflict, to a trial, and to death. Jesus dies on a cross not because it's one more thing on his "save the world" to do list, but because death at the hands of the empire is the logical consequence for challenging the controlling power of this world with the embodied power of God's love.

What does his death accomplish? What good is Good Friday? The answer to this question is one we can only receive with faith. This news only becomes good news, only becomes Gospel, by trusting in the unending love of God. Jesus' death directly addresses the question, "Where is God?" with the answer "Here he is."

Here on the cross. Here in chains. Here on a donkey. Here at the sea. Here in the field. Here in the home. Here at Columbine. Here in Binghamton. Here in the cancer. Here in yet another disappointment, yet another broken relationship. Here in our questioning, here in our despair, here in our darkest hour. Here.

Here to give us hope. Here to give us courage. Here to remind us who is creator.

Here to show us who is in charge, who is the only one worthy of our trust. Here to challenge empire and prejudice, racism, sexism, homophobia, and fear itself. Here to resist evil, here to overcome sin, here to fill suffering with his presence. Here.

IV.

One more parade story. Abidjan, Ivory Coast, West Africa. 1995. The centennial General Assembly of the World Student Christian Federation.

Sunday morning. Buses depart from a single location to churches all over the country. Buses filled with representatives from the world - Christians from India, Russia, and Chile, from Italy, New Zealand, and the United States. My bus arrives in a suburb, in a small plaza with no church in sight. We step off the bus into a sea of hands. Suddenly, a brass band. A mass of people begins to move down the red dust road. Drums play. Battered tuba and other horns play a joyful hymn. We begin to march. Where is God? Here he is. Where is Christ? Here in our parade. Shining in our faces. Stomping with our feet. Singing in our songs. We are a beautiful, broken, yearning, struggling, diverse, confident and motley bunch of believers. And we sing, we march, we keep moving, because he is here. Amen.