

Sermon for Palm Sunday, Apr. 2, 2023 Paula Papky for MacNeill Baptist Church

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Matthew 21:1-11

Come Join the Parade

This week we enter into the life and death of Jesus. We begin by imagining the city of Jerusalem, a walled city, whose name means “City of Peace”. If we enter by the western gate, we are caught up in pageantry but also danger. We can sense the threat of that parade. If we enter by the eastern gate, we are caught up in the Jesus parade. That one, too, holds the possibility of danger but also the hope of new life.

Every year at Passover, the governor, Pilate, leaves his splendid palace on the edge of the Mediterranean and travels to Jerusalem for the festival. It’s not as if he had any reverence for the Jewish religion and its festivals. His main job, assigned by the Emperor in Rome, is to keep the peace in a city swollen with visitors. It’s a city celebrating its long-ago liberation from slavery in Egypt. And it’s up to Pilate to keep a lid on things. It’s a bit like homecoming at McMaster, with police on horseback, moving among the throngs of revelers, trying to keep the lid on.

There’s a huge garrison next to the palace where Pilate stays when he’s in town. There are soldiers in the city; there are secret police and spies. They circulate among the throngs and stand, well-armed and short-tempered, on the city walls. They can be called upon to tamp down any hint of trouble, especially any attempt at another liberation, this time a liberation from the Roman Empire.

Forget any notion of Jerusalem as a city of peace. In the Roman Empire, the only peace was peace with bloodshed. It was the empire of oppression.

Pilate enters the city with warhorses and armed cavalry; with armour glistening; with golden eagles held aloft on poles. The sound of drums and marching feet could chill the blood. And yet, you had to cheer and look excited if you knew what was good for you. Anyway, who doesn't love a parade?

Jesus and his disciples and a group of followers have gathered not far away from the eastern wall of the city, in the place long called The Mount Of Olives. Is it coincidence? The great prophet, Zechariah, had spoken of a day when the Lord would stand on the Mount of Olives, prepared to fight Israel's enemies. And is it coincidence that the same prophet had spoken of a king coming to Jerusalem, riding on a donkey and the foal of a donkey? There are no coincidences in the Scriptures. Jesus deliberately models his entry into the city on those images from Zechariah.

Clearly, Jesus has a plan. He sends two disciples ahead to fetch a donkey with a young foal. He gives the two men a password, a code to speak should they be stopped and questioned. They are to say, "The Lord has need of it." So far, his plan is working, he's in control of the situation. And notice Jesus refers to himself as "Lord."

Unfortunately, there's a leak, maybe from his own disciples. The word begins to spread through the crowd that Jesus is a king and so, for a while, Jesus has less control. Cloaks are spread on the road so that even the donkeys will walk on soft ground. The crowd is growing in number. People are waving palms, that

signal of victory in battle. And then, the crowd begins to sing and shout and grow ever larger. Well, the best laid plans gang oft awry, don't they?

"Hosanna, save us," the people cry as Jesus enters through the eastern gate. "Baruk haba," they chant. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Imagine the city dwellers high up on the Temple platform, looking down on the scene, at the two parades entering through opposite gates. They're uneasy now. Outsiders entering a city always create unrest. Remember the truckers' protest in Ottawa? That created unrest, for sure. The gospel writer says the city of Jerusalem, city of peace, was in turmoil.

Anyone familiar with the Scriptures would have understood the Jesus parade right away. They'd have remembered the Zechariah prophecy about a new king coming to Jerusalem. They'd have known the part of that prophecy about the bloodshed that would come before the restoration of the holy city. The Roman Empire was entering from the western gate; a new king was entering from the east.

The people ask one another, "Who is this?" The answer swirls around: "this is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee. " Clearly he's an outsider. He's a country dweller, in an age when city dwellers and country people often fell into conflict and turmoil. And we who read Matthew's gospel know that what happens next is that scene when Jesus goes to the Temple and performs a prophetic, symbolic act: he overturns the tables of the money changers and lets loose the animals for sacrifice. Turmoil and more turmoil. And it is just beginning.

As we prepare to enter the week of Jesus' death, we make our choice: will we ride into the city with the parade of power, domination, wealth, and the Law? Or will we walk in that other parade with Jesus?

Will we walk with those children at Hess St. School who come to school hungry? Our Outreach Board has asked us to reach out with donations of food this Easter. Will we walk with those who need healing? Will we engage with those who are trying to come up with solutions for the homeless of our city? Just a month ago we read in Isaiah, "And you shall be called the repairers of the breach, the restorers of streets to live." Will we walk with those at city hall who cry for justice? Will we work to restore hope in the unloved, the rejected?

Will we make a great show of our power and privilege? Or will we throw off our mantle of righteousness; will we cast aside our cloaks of authority, and enter as Jesus does: humbly, open-eyed, knowing the risks but holding to the vision of the reign of God, already here, ready to oppose the powers of sin.

"Baruk haba!" the people shouted. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" Amen.