



“Between Two Crowds”

Rev. Dr. Michael L. Gregg

April 9, 2017

Matthew 21:1-11

I love a parade, the tramping of feet,
I love every beat I hear of a drum.
I love a parade, when I hear a band
I just want to stand and cheer as they come.
That rat-a tat-tat, the blare of a horn.
That rat-a tat-tat, a bright uniform;
The sight of a drill will give me a thrill,
I thrill at the skill of everything military.
I love a parade, a handful of vets,
A line of cadets or any brigade,
For I love a parade.

Do you know in what year “I Love a Parade” was first recorded? 1931. People have loved parades for a long time. From the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade to the Rose Bowl Parade to every small-town celebration of the Fourth of July, parades are a fun way to bring us together. Amanda and I were talking the other night about parades and she mentioned that she’s been in at least fifty parades. Apparently, when you’re from a small town surrounded by other small towns there’s not much to do but celebrate every holiday and festival with a parade. From marching as a tiny majorette, to playing in the band, to riding a grand float as the Swamp Cabbage Festival Queen, Amanda must feel right at home with our Palm Sunday parade.

Growing up in Nashville, there weren’t as many opportunities for me to march in parades. I did, however, participate in one parade when I was in high school. I marched with the John Overton High School Marching Band in the Fiesta Bowl Parade in Phoenix, Arizona. I played the bass drum and carried that beast of metal and plastic for miles along the parade route. There are a lot of rules to marching in a parade. But the only rule that mattered was if you are marching behind a horse, watch where you step. That was easier said than done while carrying a huge drum.

Until I marched in the Fiesta Bowl Parade, it never occurred to me how much cleanup was necessary after the event was over. Getting rid of the popcorn, confetti, paper hotdog and hamburger wrappers, plastic cups, cigarette butts, and horse leftovers never before crossed my mind. But I noticed by the next day on the well-worn streets of Phoenix, virtually every trace of the parade was swept away, leaving the parade route clean and ready for the normalcy of Monday travel and traffic. Yes, we love parades and we love to beat our drums in the middle of the action, but we tend not to think of the mess left behind.

Because we are a liturgical church, this Sunday marks the beginning of the “Parade Season” in the church. Many other churches are celebrating the same way by waving palms while processing in to “All Glory, Laud, and Honor.” It is a triumphant and fun moment as we are in the middle of the action, the middle of the parade. But we will leave at the end of the service today and go back into the world and into our normal lives. Holy Week is a mess of emotions, suffering, frustrations, and fears. But that “in-between” time is quickly eclipsed by the grandest of all parades—Easter Sunday. Pews will be packed and the strong scent of lilies will swirl through the air amidst the vibrant notes of brass and the swell of the organ. It will be a triumphant day as we celebrate Jesus’s victory over the grave and our spiritual identities as resurrected people. Yes, everybody loves a parade.

But with the parade comes a paradox. The festival frenzy of waving palms, the marvelous chaos of Jesus entering Jerusalem in procession, the shouting disciples and braying donkeys will soon give away to the betrayal, the anguish, the abandonment, the suffering, and death. We who shout "Hosanna" will soon cry, "Crucify Him!" Holy Week rests between two parades, between two crowds. Holy Week has two clashing moods, two differing attitudes, two varying approaches towards life and towards God. We are soon to be in between two crowds.

I grew up as the child of an orchestra conductor. Classical music was played constantly in my house and I enjoyed listening to the soaring music of a symphony. But the thing that really caught my attention was the atonal music, with unharmonious melodies. Classical musicians call those moments of unbalanced notes, dissonance. When harmony between two notes is absent, the music is uneasy and upsetting. Dissonance is difficult, because most of us long for harmony. But sometimes dissonance is a reality. This week at Royal Lane we had a baby born, Iris Jo Bever, but we also had two memorial services and grieved the loss of Terry Simmons and Steve Dolloff. The parade and the Passion. We get the good word about an experimental drug, but the cancer has already spread too far. The parade and the Passion. We find out that we are pregnant, but learn soon after that the baby has a genetic disease. The parade and the Passion. We fight and march and protest for the rights of all people, then we find out about the deaths of children in a Civil War. The parade and the passion. Sometimes there is dissonance in our lives. Life is not always a parade. The party is overshadowed by the Passion.

And so, there were two crowds in Jerusalem for Passover—the crowd of Palm Sunday and the crowd of Good Friday. Both groups chanted, “Hosanna to the Son of David. Hosanna to the Son of David. The king of Israel has come.” They were angry and eager, hopeful and defeated. They wanted Jesus to be king. They wanted him to speak with the golden-tongue of a politician. They wanted to turn the parade into a protest. And what did Jesus say? He said nothing. Here in this cacophony of craziness, Jesus didn’t say a word. He rode in silence. Silence.

Jesus rode on a donkey. The crowds wanted him to ride on a tall, majestic horse, dignified and strong. They wanted him to perch proudly in a chariot of war, glistening in its golden trim. But Jesus rode on an animal of peace, not of combat. The crowd wanted him to grasp a sword in his hand, but he had an olive branch of goodwill in his fingers. The crowds wanted him to give an enflamed and impassioned speech to inspire them to revolution. They wanted the shouts of soldiers but they heard only the songs of children. And Jesus? Jesus didn’t say a word. Not a word as he rode into Jerusalem.

Jesus was quiet because he knew the seismic transformation that would happen in the time between the two crowds would not come from violent revolution, but from loving sacrifice. A shift was taking place in the time between parades. Matthew states that when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil. The Greek word for turmoil means “was shaken” or “trembled” or “seismic.” This word also described the earthquake when Jesus took his final breath on the cross and the shaking that occurred at the appearance of the angel at the tomb. When the Messiah comes, it is an earth-shaking event. There was a seismic shift taking place in Jerusalem. The political and spiritual structures were being shaken and rearranged. We need to shake up what it means to be a part of Jesus’s crowd. We need to shout the power of the non-violent king. Hosanna! Hosanna is one of those rare Aramaic words we find in the Greek-written Gospels and only in connection with Jesus’s procession into Jerusalem. Hosanna is an exclamation of praise that means “save us.”

“Save us!” the crowd cried out, creating a royal carpet of cloaks, coats, and tree branches. “Save us!” they shouted, reminding us that the messiness of division and marginalization still permeates the fabric of our existence today, preventing peace. As we linger between two parades and “Hosanna!” escapes our lips we are beckoned to join this passionate procession for peace and justice. For the power of reconciliation becomes possible when common people with uncommon courage oppose exclusionary practices and policies and together stand with “the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Jesus who enters Jerusalem was and always is a challenge to this world’s powers and principalities—not merely a spiritual challenge but a political challenge as well. His cause is not the same as that of the Zealots or any violent insurrectionists, that of some aspiring political party, or that of a legislative or executive agenda. This king Jesus did all of his work of redemption and mercy between the parades, between the “Hosannas” and between the “Crucify Hims.” Jesus did not come in humble triumph in order to leave the ways of the world as they were. He came to shake things up. He came so we could follow a gentle king, and promote a new Jerusalem, a redeemed world keeping with the character of “God with us.”

All of which leads me to wonder: as we enter Palm Sunday this year, instead of a sweet children’s parade, with adorable little ones swinging palms and shouting “Hallelujah,” what if we treated this day as a protest? What if we followed Jesus’s kingly example, questioning political rulers who throw their weight around and ride big warhorses? What if we created a royal pathway for the humble, lifting up the need for fair treatment and equal rule for all? What if we used this day to appeal to our legislators for justice? What if we took the time between the two crowds to move from parade to protest? We all have our own Jerusalems, our own communities where our humble protests call for loving all people and making sure all can find hope and healing.

So, what do we do between the two parades? What happens between the cheering crowd and the jeering crowd? What happens between the festive flair of Palm Sunday and the holy hullabaloo of Easter? Who cleans up the mess in between? The humble, non-violent king picked up the trash, cleaning up the soot and stain of our sins and brokenness once and for all. The work and witness of Holy Week yearns for us to take notice. Without fully experiencing Holy Week, we

lose something valuable—a behind the scenes look at the real cost of our resurrected lives and the dirty work it took to gift us those lives. It is important that we march in Sacrament, in deed, and in solidarity with our sisters and brothers, with those who experience a world of protest rather than parade. Yes, everybody loves a parade and deserves a parade, but many people are caught between the two crowds and seem to only encounter the rough, messy places. We must walk where Jesus walked, between the two parades and bless those who don't have a reason to celebrate.

What do we do with our dirty and dusty cloaks, trampled palms, and donkey leftovers? We follow in the footsteps of the prophet of Nazareth. We walk along with Jesus, shouldering our own “trash bags” to pick up the dirty and trampled places of our lives and the lives of people in our communities. We march this “in between” time with Jesus amidst the dirt and refuse of injustice and inequality. We are called to open our eyes and see beyond the last marcher, the last partygoer, to notice that the seismic sacrifice and salvation of Jesus is between two crowds.

Amen.