

Everyone Loves a Parade
March 16, 2008

Today is Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. Palm Sunday's joyous parade into Jerusalem happened only five days before Jesus was crucified on Good Friday. What is the connection between the hero's welcome he received on Sunday and the persecution Christ faced on Friday of the same week? Paul explores those themes in the Christ Hymn, from Philippians 2:5-11. Listen now for God's Word.

Philippians 2:5-11:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death: even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

One: This is the Word of the Lord. **All: Thanks be to God.**

I enjoy parades and Palm Sunday is a day for a parade. Every year, I look forward to the procession for Palm Sunday in the Park.¹ As we stand together in Wilson Park, it is a powerful reminder to me of how, even though our congregations worship separately, we share a powerful common bond with our fellow Christians in this community. We all acknowledge and worship the same Messiah.

Think with me: what are some reasons you might throw a parade? We see them on special holidays, like Christmas or New Year's. The grandeur of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade is legendary. High schools and colleges have parades for homecoming. We have parades for significant accomplishments: there is usually a victory parade waiting for the Super Bowl champions when they return to their hometown. The Giants held a festive parade on the streets of New York after they upset the Patriots this year. There have also been parades after military victories.

Have you ever heard of a parade to celebrate a man who is about to get arrested and executed? Of course, the members of the crowd do not imagine they are cheering for a man with an impending death sentence. Why then does the crowd show up for the parade? Does the crowd really know about who Jesus is? I imagine that many show up because they are curious about this Jesus fellow; they are unsure what to make of him. This Wednesday at our Lenten worship service, Henry Baumann asked us a crucial question, "What do we make of this Jesus? Who do we say that he is?" This is not

¹ Palm Sunday in the Park is the name for an annual ecumenical worship service in Martinsville. The six local congregations that participate are: First Presbyterian, First Baptist, Starling Avenue Baptist, Broad Street Christian, Calvary Christian, and Holy Trinity Lutheran Churches.

simply an interesting intellectual query. God invites us to find meaning and purpose in life by placing our trust in Christ as our Savior.

The crowd is interested in Jesus for at least three reasons: they potentially recognize Jesus as a miracle worker, a prophet, and the Son of David. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus draws hoards of people because of his miracles. He feeds five thousand with five loaves of bread and two fish. He heals the sick and the lame. He restores sight to the blind. He turns water into wine. He cures a demoniac of his mental illness. People gather for Jesus' miracles like an audience tunes into David Blaine or David Copperfield. Jesus is able to perform these miracles, not through any trickery, but because he has the Spirit's power as God's Son. Jesus is often frustrated because his miracles are not the main point: Jesus' primary mission is the salvation, hope, and reconciliation he brings. Unfortunately, many in this Palm Sunday procession are too focused on his miracles to notice his main purpose.

The crowd also recognizes Jesus as a prophet. Jews are familiar with prophets, who bring God's Word to the people. Christians often have misperceptions of the role of prophets. Christians often see prophets as people who foretell the future. In the Bible, prophets occasionally predict what will happen, but primarily they are truth tellers about the present day. Prophets are motivated by God's Spirit to speak honestly about what is happening. Prophets often point out sin and call people to repent, turning individuals and nations back towards God. As you can imagine, prophets are often unpopular: sometimes we prefer to hear sugar coated, polite conversation rather than the hard truth.

Some of Jesus' words are not so easy to swallow. Jesus instructs the rich young ruler to give up his possessions. He tells his disciples to put their allegiance to him above their own loyalty to their families. Christ teaches that we need to not just avoid bad behavior, but we should also avoid sinful thoughts and attitudes. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus encourages us to resist prideful anger and lust.

Last December, I went to a concert the day after Christmas. The lead singer of the band told us he was born on Christmas day, so he wanted to give a toast to the baby Jesus, but not the adult Jesus. This lead singer then explained that he liked the baby Jesus, but was not a big fan of what Jesus said and did as an adult. I was bothered that this man thought he could simply ignore the parts of Jesus he did not like, but, to be honest, the adult Jesus is troubling to many people. Jesus does not let us off easy. He expects us to be our best selves and to serve others. Jesus insists that religion is not merely private: because God has loved us so much we have the responsibility to love others and to make the world a better place. Jesus is certainly a prophet who tells the truth, not to be mean, but because Jesus believes in us. Jesus affirms that we don't have to get stuck in self-destructive behavior. Jesus has faith that we can spread his good news and joy to this troubled world.

Most of the crowd probably came to the parade because they heard Jesus is a Son of David. Jesus is a direct descendent of David, and the crowd has high hopes for him. The crowd anticipates that Jesus may be the Messiah who can deliver the nation of Israel.

Of course, King David is the most beloved of all the Old Testament kings. When first century Jews bring up King David, they are harkening back to the “good ole” days. Many Americans romanticize George Washington and the founding fathers in a similar fashion. Under David’s rule, Israel was an independent nation, not under the control of the Roman authority or any other foreign government. Israel achieved military victories, was respected in the international realm, and acquired wealth. To achieve this success, David was almost constantly at war. So when they call Jesus Son of David, they hope this parade is a coronation on the way to the battlefield. But Jesus comes as the prince of peace. He does not achieve power through violence: in fact, he knows that responding evil for evil is a sign of weakness.

The citizens of Jerusalem throw a parade for Jesus because he is a miracle worker, a prophet, and the Son of David. But it turns out, Jesus is not the kind of miracle worker they want, as a prophet he tells them things they do not want to hear, and the crowd is not ready to follow a king who resists bloodshed and instead advocates for peace. The crowd initially celebrates Jesus for three reasons, but he fails to live up to their expectations. Jesus is so disappointing to them that we find the same people who shouted, “Hosanna, hosanna!” to Jesus on Sunday yelled, “Crucify him!” on Friday. The crowd’s reaction is a lesson for all of us: we should not be close-minded when someone is different than what we expect. Rather than judging and dismissing them, God invites us to learn from those who are different: they can give us a fresh perspective on life.

We have the benefit of hindsight to understand that Jesus is worthy of praise. So why do we have a parade almost two thousand years after Jesus walked on this earth? What are the reasons that we continue to celebrate Christ? Paul explains what is so amazing about our Lord in the Christ hymn in Philippians 2. Paul tells us that Christ is the pre-existent Word. He has existed with God the Father from the beginning of time, as an equal member of the Trinity. In heaven, this eternal Christ was protected from the uncertainty, pain, and loneliness of life. Christ had unimaginable power as God’s Son and was comfortable and loved in heaven. Paul tells us that Christ gave it all up and emptied himself for our sake.

What does it mean for Christ to empty himself? I found a helpful analogy this week: of a father teaching his young son how to play catch. When his son is starting to learn how to catch, Dad throws the ball underhanded and without much pace to make it easier for his son. The youngster throws it back in Dad’s general direction and Dad goes after it. There is no way the two can play catch if Dad throws his fastball right away. Dad empties himself of his full power. He still has the capacity to do more, but he chooses not to use it.²

When Christ is nailed to the cross, his disciples hoped that God would rescue him. Surely God’s Son would not die! Christ could have avoided that painful death, but he chose to die for our sake. His enemies thought when Jesus drew his last breath that they had given him the final blow, but in the shadow of the cross, Christ achieved his

² I found this analogy in David E. Leininger’s book Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit: Series VI, Cycle A, p. 70.

greatest victory. In the Christ hymn, Paul tells us that God the Father highly exalts Jesus because of his tremendous sacrifice.

Paul suggests that perhaps the greatest thing about Christ is his sacrificial love for all of us. Christ does not simply sit on the sidelines. He gets involved with the messiness of life and gets his hands dirty, which clearly shows his profound concern for us.

I received an email a couple of months ago about the philosophy of Charles Schultz, the creator of the "Peanuts" comic strip. Schultz invited us to consider the following questions:

1. Name the five wealthiest people in the world.
2. Name the last five Heisman trophy winners.
3. Name the last five winners of the Miss America pageant.
4. Name ten people who have won the Nobel or Pulitzer Prize.
5. Name the last half dozen Academy Award winners for best actor and actress.
6. Name the last decade's worth of World Series winners.

How did you do? Even for trivia buffs, the questions are tough. It is difficult to remember the yesterday's headlines. These are no second-rate achievers. They are the best in their fields. But the applause dies. Awards tarnish. Achievements are forgotten. Accolades and certificates are buried with their owners. Here's another quiz. See how you do on this one:

1. List a few teachers who aided your journey through school.
2. Name 3 friends who have helped you through a difficult time.
3. Name 5 people who have taught you something worthwhile.
4. Think of a few people who have made you feel appreciated and special.
5. Think of five people you enjoy spending time with.

Wasn't that easier? The point is that the people who make a difference in our lives are not the ones with the most credentials, the most money, or the most awards. They are the ones that care.

In first century Palestine, Christ was noteworthy for many reasons; he was a miracle worker, a prophet, and a Son of David. If that was all Jesus was, almost everyone would have forgotten about him. Christ had tremendous credentials, but we celebrate him today as the most important person who has ever lived because he is God's Son and he continues to care for you and me. Christ has shown that he has the power to give us new life through his sacrificial death. We are that special to God. The Christ hymn tells us that greatness is not achieved in how many awards we receive or how well respected we are in our field of work, but in how we give of ourselves to care for others. Thanks be to God for the amazing love that God's Son offered when he emptied himself and died on the cross for our sake. Amen.