

Palm Sunday 2020
Sermon 4.5.20

Zechariah 9:9-12

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem; and the battle-bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double.

Matthew 21:1-11

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 fulfil 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." (351)

Have you imagined what you'd do if the danger were passed? Go to the movies? Go to a contra dance? Go to your bridge game, or reconstitute your soccer league, or just go to the grocery store without your facemask and that clench in your jaw? Go out to dinner. Go to church; wave a palm on Palm Sunday and shout "Hosanna!" as has been done from time immemorial. Or take that trip! I look forward to karaoke, which is when I goof around with friends. Actually, I'd enjoy just having a reason to get dressed in the morning. Putting on my pjs at night doesn't feel nearly as good when I've just sloughed them off a couple hours earlier.

One podcaster I listen to imagined this would be the scene were the danger to pass: "Sailors kissing nurses in the street." Recalling the parade in Times Square after the end of the Second World War, and that iconic photograph, he wished for a victorious day showing forth the likes of sailors kissing nurses in the streets—though, given the circumstances, it might be more like nurses kissing sailors in the street.

Will we ever feel that safe again?

Listening to this podcaster recall that victory parade put me in mind of the story I knew we'd be hearing this Sunday, Palm Sunday, as we do every year. This features in all three synoptic gospels and so is a part of every church year—Jesus' so-called triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Each gospel narrative remembers it a little differently, but what's striking is how for the most part they're quite the same. In each we have Jesus riding a humble animal, whether a donkey, a colt, or the foal of a donkey—though only Matthew remembers him (rather awkwardly) riding two humble animals. In each, we have people strewing Jesus' path with leaves of some sort—though in this version there's no mention of palms. In each, the crowd that has followed Jesus now has formed as the happy audience of this makeshift parade, shouting, "Hosanna to the son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"—"hosanna" meaning "save" or "help!" In each, it seems this is a strange acting out of a familiar trope, and all three remember this event as happening at the same time in Jesus' life, the first day of the last week, as if this acting out was the start of it all.

Did you notice this, that Jesus seems to have arranged for this to happen, a strange, perhaps ironic acting out of a familiar trope? In telling two of his disciples to go into the village ahead of them and to find there the beast of burden that would bear him up, he was arranging for this display.

It's easy to overlook this otherwise apparent fact—easy to overlook it because of the much more striking fact of Jesus knowing about the availability of that animal ahead of time. Because of Jesus' striking foreknowledge of this fact, it's easy to not notice his manipulation of this fact.

It's different—this manipulation and arranging. This is different for Jesus—this, his performing instead of responding. He's sort of a puppet-master here, a provocateur.

I think we've seen Jesus mostly spontaneous and responsive to what story he's a part of, what story is unfolding around and amidst him. I think, in the synoptic gospels anyway, Jesus is very much amidst life, participating in it while it happens to him and around him, responsive to people and circumstances as they approach or arise.

In the Gospel of John, it's otherwise, I suppose. In the Gospel of John, there is the sense that Jesus has come fully knowing how all this would play out, which means there's always the question as to whether he was thus making it play out.

But in the synoptic gospels—the books that present a synopsis of Jesus’s life, Matthew, Mark, and Luke—it’s felt more as if Jesus is a part of things as they play out. He’s not *making* them happen that way, they simply are happening and he is responding, participating.

Except here. Except in this so-called triumphal entry. Here Jesus has arranged the occurrence. Here he’s directed its course. It all seems staged—and though the people’s response to it isn’t exactly (there’s no indication he told the crowd, “Now is when you say, ‘Hosanna!’”) what he has staged was perhaps a familiar enough trope that the people knew what role they were to play, knew what lines they were to recite. “Hosanna: he has helped us. Hosanna: he has saved us!”

Of course, what he staged *was* and *is* a familiar trope. Otherwise, it wouldn’t have sprung to mind when I was imagining all those nurses kissing those all those sailors. The victory parade: it’s a type. It’s also, in this case, a provocation because what Jesus arranged for doesn’t entirely fit the type. It departs from it, and the ways in which it departs from type are what’s interesting here, and might be indicative of what Jesus was up to here.

For it does seem he was up to something, right?

Katie Hines-Shah, pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church in Hinsdale, Illinois, gives us a sense of what that might have been. Writing in an article for *The Christian Century*, she explains, “The trappings of triumph are well known. The latest in military machinery is on display, whether it be horses and chariots or missiles, tanks... The people respond with accolades, whether because they are paid in denarii and circus games or because they are threatened by their party leader and the secret police. The leader is an undisputed strongman...He uses his parade to bolster his own power and position, and that of a select ruling class. The religious establishment quickly falls in line. The triumphal entry displays the might of empire, simultaneously encouraging the few in power while frightening the masses into subservience.”

Given all this, then, it’s clear, as Hines-Shah also writes, “Jesus does it all wrong. Instead of entering Jerusalem on a tank, Jesus uses a tractor... Neither an army nor the rich and famous accompany Jesus on his march. Instead his disciples, a ragtag group of fisherman, common folks, and at least one disreputable tax collector, make up the entourage.”

What’s more, “The crowds themselves may not even be from Jerusalem. These are, perhaps, the very people Jesus healed and fed, country folk too desperate to wait at home for help and too poor to buy their own lunch. Waving palm branches and throwing down their cloaks, they

make an unscripted celebration. There's no goose-stepping here, no coordinated show of gratitude with ribbons or cards. According to Matthew, the people of Jerusalem don't even know who Jesus is. There are no marble busts of the messiah, no propaganda posters or laudatory TV interviews. Jesus is unknown."

See, one possible point of this whole performance is to invite a contrast between what typically plays out when someone powerful enters a great city, and what's played out here. Jesus is king, but not quite. Jesus is triumphant, though he hasn't even apparently yet fought the fight. The people are captured by him, but freely so. They are captured as if prisoners of hope.

Prisoners of hope! Perhaps now unable to shake the suspicion that things as are, are not as they should be, the people have become prisoners of hope. Perhaps now unable to slough off the abiding conviction that life as it is, is not okay: they could do better, they should seek better. Now healed, now fed, now tended to and loved, not exploited but humanized, not dismissed but embraced, they're perhaps captured by a conviction that something better could be, should be; and with this one they'd come to follow, maybe it even would be.

I came across this poem this week. It would have been on the front of the bulletin in Monterey if we were to have a bulletin and to gather in Monterey. It's called "The Saving Way," and it's by mid-20th century poet Hayden Carruth:

When the little girl was told that the sun someday
In a billion years or a trillion, will burn out dead,
She sobbed in a fierce and ancient way,
And stamped, and shook her head
Till the brown curls flew; and I wondered how,
Given the world, given her place and time,
She would ever come in her own right mind to know
That it all may happen one day before her prime
The lights go out in one crude burst
Or slowly, blinking across the cold,
The last and worst
The genii or the fisherman had foretold;
And I wondered also how she should ever find

That town whose monuments
Are the rusty barbed wire rattling in the wind
And the town tents
Amidst whose shredding the bodies crawl
Forever and ever, the broken dead
Who arise again, and again and always fall
For a word that someone said;
Or how she should seek the plundered isles
Adrift on the smoking seas,
Or the desert bloodied for miles and miles,
Or the privacies
Of the Jews laid out in a snowy woods,
The black men laid in the swamp,
All in their hundred attitudes
Of grave desire; or how when the wind is damp
She should come someday to a marble square
Where papers blow and her father stands
In idle discourse with a millionaire
Who will rape her later on with his own hands;
And I wondered finally how all this
Will be anything to secure
What she knows now in her child's instinct is
The sole world, immensely precious and impure.
My dear, will you learn the saving way?
And then we can go,
In keen joy like Lear and like Cordelia gay,
To invent our lives from these rich hours of woe?

Jesus is like, but unlike. Jesus is typical and wholly other. Jesus fills out the form of triumphal parade, but does it in a way that calls the whole thing into question.

And maybe that's what he was up to here.

Provocation of the powers, arousal of those who would be threatened by this, such a one as Jesus being hailed a king: this was the trigger, this was the spur. "Sedition" would be the accusation, and death would be the sentence—because you can't be called "king" if you're not the king. This is practically an act of war. So, this was a performance to provoke, and if a victory parade, a premature one. He hadn't yet won. He hadn't even begun to fight. Nor would he fight—for that's not the saving way. Nor would he win—or at least not like that.

From here Jesus would enter the Temple, where he would overturn the tables of those selling animals for sacrifice. Then, authorities would approach him, one after another, scandalized that people were calling him "savior," "king." Then would come parables that seemed pointed at particular people and structures of power. Then would come preaching about the woe to befall those in charge, rich hours of woe from which might spring insight—or might just be an end unto themselves.

Then would come his last supper and his arrest.

Then would come the trial and Pilate's obfuscation and the people's insistence.

Then would come the sentencing, the condemnation, the crucifixion.

Of this victory parade, then, you might wonder if the powers and principalities had a good laugh about it by the end of the week. Problem solved.

Indeed. Problem solved: because what we need saving from, we of this world, isn't Pontius Pilate, or not only him. And it's not those who down through history would fill that same form—the tyrant, the dictator, the shambolic fool-king: it's the recurrent, tragic fact of too much power in one person's hands, whether granted or grabbed.

What we need saving from isn't religious authorities or religion itself, and isn't national authorities or state authorities or even just authorities: it's the recurrent fact of authority, that God-blessed charisma, playing out instead for the purposes of exploitation, and the securing and accumulating of itself for itself.

What we need saving from isn't these bad guys or those bad guys, and it's not this bad idea or that bad idea, and it's not this faulty plan or that faulty plan: it's the recurrent fact of badness, the objective reality of it and our subjective perception of it and twisted response to it.

What we need saving from is something more terribly intrinsic and interwoven, something more troublingly insidious and disembodied, something quite akin to this virus, which makes it so even the notion of anyone kissing anyone in the street, anyone hugging anyone in relief and rejoicing, people even passing the peace, is so violating as to seem violent.

What we need saving from is the capacity that inheres in all things, not least in ourselves, not least in our own hearts, to warp and pervert and contort blessing and goodness and gifts of the spirit, that these things instead play out amidst history for purposes other than abundant life, purposes other than eternal love. What we need saving from is all that is not love.

We need saving from all that is not love.

This means, of course, that only love will save. Putting up a fight won't do it. Making war won't do it. Ginning up a riot won't do it. Acts of terror won't do it. Back-stabbing and gossip-mongering and grudge-holding won't do it. Only love will save us from all that is not love.

This week we walk to the manifestation of love, the cross.

Bless us on the journey, that we might arrive at the true and glorious end.

Thanks be to God.