

“The Tale of Two Parades”
Luke 19:28-40

With the downturn in our economy, many companies are working hard to lure more customers with sales, promotions, and special offers. What is interesting is that this trend has found its way into the church. Many churches around our country have been trying a new technique to encourage their members to give more money with the assurance of a 90-day money back guarantee. For example, in Heartsong Church in Cordova, TN, this is what church members were offered, “If at the end of the three months, you don't feel like you have been blessed more than you gave, then we'll give you the money back.” I find this kind of guarantee ironic in light of the challenges of the Bible story of Palm Sunday which we are celebrating today. Jesus does not offer his disciples such money-back guarantees. In fact, it seems that he offers them the opposite. If they walk with him, they are sure to encounter danger and challenge.

Even though we have heard this story of Palm Sunday told many times with the idea that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was such a joyous occasion to the city, there is certainly more to this story than is often told. According to the work of biblical scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in their book *The Last Week*, Jesus' parade was not the only one in town. A much bigger parade was taking place on the other side of town. The other parade was that of Pilate's. “The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus' crucifixion. Though unfamiliar to most people today, the imperial procession was well known in the Jewish homeland in the first century. It was common for Pilate and his predecessors and successors to go to Jerusalem for the high holidays. This was the week of Passover. Pilate's procession displayed not only imperial power, but also Roman imperial theology. According to this theology, the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome, but the Son of God...Inscriptions refer to him [the emperor] as “son of God,” “Lord” and “Savior,” one who had brought “peace on earth.”

From this insight we can see that Jesus was challenging an imperial parade and offering an alternative to the brute power and occupation of the Roman Empire. What we can see from the account in Luke is that there was a multitude of disciples who were following Jesus on that day, evidently knowing how dangerous their actions were but still being willing to risk their lives for the message and hope which Jesus was offering them. It certainly was not an offer of money-back guarantee. What is powerful to me about this story is that Jesus was very intentional in the way he entered into Jerusalem. This was an intentional dramatic, prophetic act to convey a strong message to the whole city. Prophetic acts were theatrical/dramatic ways the prophets of old tried to convey their messages while capturing the attention of the people. For example, the Prophet Isaiah walked naked through the streets of Jerusalem over a period of three years to warn the Jewish people what would happen if they made an alliance with Egypt—they would be carried off naked as the spoils of war (Isaiah 20). Jesus in the same way was trying to give people an alternative to the kingdom of Rome by showing them on the same day a parade that represented the Kingdom of God, a kingdom of peace and justice where there was no exploitation and oppression. Instead the Kingdom was an offer of a community that practiced love and compassion. Jesus' parade was very different from that of Pilate and his imperial power. It was a humble parade with peasants for the crowd and a donkey for the ride. Even though riding the donkey was a fulfillment of a prophecy from Zechariah, it was also a clear message to the people that Jesus was entering Jerusalem not as another military leader but as a leader for peace and justice.

The multitude of disciples who followed Jesus into Jerusalem are often presented to us as a fickle crowd that were happy to see him on Sunday but then by Friday, they had changed their

minds about him and cried out for his execution. But a closer look at the story in Luke and Mark shows us that this multitude of disciples were not already in Jerusalem. They were following Jesus. They knew what he was doing. They knew that their walk with him and their parade was a direct challenge to the powers of the day. The crowd that shouted later to have Jesus crucified was a crowd that most likely was incited by the high priests (Mark 15:11). In his *Jewish Antiquities*, Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, highlights the distinction between the pro-Jesus Jewish crowd and the anti-Jesus authorities. He says, "Jesus won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him."

The question is of course before us today, "Would we have chosen to walk with Jesus in his parade into Jerusalem if we knew that it was a direct opposition to the imperial government of Rome?" Would we have risked our lives and own families for the sake the Kingdom of God?" "Which parade would have inspired us?" The parade of the one riding on a donkey in a peaceful resistance or the parade of a powerful ruler with horses, swords and military power? These are not easy questions to answer. In faith, we would hope that we would be on the side of Jesus, but in real life, when the consequences can be so grave for us, it is not always easy to do the right thing. Even the most faithful disciples when Jesus was finally arrested, were scared for their lives and many of them abandoned him for a while. It is not an easy call to follow Christ!

Last Tuesday as we were studying this text in our worship committee, one of the members said, "Why would anyone want to be a Christian? If we take the call of Jesus seriously, that means we would be risking our comfort and even our security." I believe that these are good questions. Following Christ is the best thing that could happen to any of us, yet it is also one of the hardest things we can do in life. It is not because Jesus demands things out of us. It is because his way of love and compassion often comes into conflict with the oppressive powers of our world. When we follow Christ, the pain of others and the suffering of the world become ours. We would not be able to read the news with apathy any more. The suffering of poor people in Haiti becomes our burden. We become the ones who are blessed to come in the name of the Lord.

Today, we had six of our young people confirmed into the Christian faith. Their lives are not going to be the same because of their decision to be followers of Christ. All of their decisions and commitments are subject to their love for God. We celebrate their journey and their courage to walk this path with Christ, knowing that it is a challenging one.

In a recent article, Joan Chittister wrote that, "The miracle of the Red Sea," the rabbis taught, "is not the parting of the waters. The miracle of the Red Sea is that with a wall of water on each side of him, the first Jew walked through." The implications are clear: God is not in this alone. Yes, God may be all-powerful and eternally unfailing, but that's not the point. The real key to the coming of the reign of God on earth... is not God's fidelity... The key to what happens on earth does not lie in God's will. All God can do is part the waters. It lies in the courage we bring to the parting of them. It lies in deciding whether or not we will walk through the parting waters of our own lives today. Just as surely as there was need for courage at the Red Sea, just as surely as there was need for courage on Jesus' last trip to Jerusalem, there is need for it here and now, as well."

The story is told about a woman named Patsy who was stuck on a highway when the road was closed because of an accident. Sherriff Larry leaned through the cruiser window and listened to the scanner. When he straightened up, he continued talking to Patsy. "I'm sorry, but I can't let

you leave. Not even to go to the next exit. Whenever there's a death it's treated like a homicide. You'll have to wait until the state patrol comes and takes your statement. Sorry." Patsy didn't respond. She needed to go to the restroom and she wanted to get inside somewhere. It was cold on the side of the highway-besides, she was still shaking. The car that had rolled over and landed in front of her had almost hit her. And then she had seen the driver die. She might be unhurt, but she was shaky. Patsy looked up at Sherrif Larry. He was a solid man. His shoulders and waist were the same width. The flashing blue lights sparked off the badge on his hat. Resigned, Patsy leaned back against the passenger door of the sheriff's car. She noticed on the passenger seat a stuffed teddy bear wearing a hat like the sheriff's. Patsy smiled and asked, "Your partner?" Sheriff Larry said, "We give them to kids to hold on to. The department actually issues us one when we start the job. Of course that first one is gone in no time. You can't take the bear back from a scared child. That must be my three-hundredth bear." Patsy said, "Why do you do this job?" She could not imagine choosing to be around all this fear and sadness. To say nothing of the danger. "How do you face this every day?" Sheriff Larry stuck his hands down into the pockets of his jacket. Then he said, "I quit for a while. I got a job as a manager over at Wal-Mart. The pay was better. But one night my son was in a car accident. I heard about it on the police scanner. I jumped in my truck and flew to the site. I didn't even bother to put on my shoes." Patsy didn't say anything. She waited. He went on, "He was ok. But the next week I said to my wife, 'out on that highway I realized where I belong. I've got to go back to law enforcement.' So, I did." Patsy said, "What did your wife say? Managing a store is a lot safer than sheriff-ing." Sheriff Larry said, "My wife said, 'We all knew it wouldn't last. You were born to law enforcement.'" Patsy looked from his face, glowing in the blue lights, to the teddy bear. Then she said, "I'm glad. We need someone like you." After the state trooper took down her statement, Patsy asked Sheriff Larry for his address. She thought she'd send him a box of teddy bears. After Sheriff Larry left to respond to another call, Patsy watched him go and tears flooded her eyes. Without thinking, she heard herself say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." May we all be blessed to go in the name of the Lord, no matter where the path may lead us. Amen.