



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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A Stephen Ministry Congregation
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Palm Sunday

March 20, 2016

“Two Parades at Passover”

(Matthew 21:9)

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“And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!’” (Mt. 21:9).

COLLECT: Almighty and everlasting God, You sent Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to take upon Himself our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross. Mercifully grant that we may follow the example of His great humility and patience and be made partakers of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

As the head of the Roman occupation forces in Judea, Pilate did not stay in the hot and restive city of Jerusalem any more than he had to. He preferred the more congenial climate of the seaside Roman garrison of Caesarea. But at certain times of the year, he knew he had to be in Jerusalem. And one of those times was the Jewish celebration of Passover.

This was a highly patriotic day for the Jews, not unlike our Independence Day because it celebrated the freedom of God's people from Egyptian slavery. But it was a celebration that had taken on sad and angry notes, for once again the Jews are not free. The Roman Empire is occupying their land, taxing them, imposing their will on them. So if ever there were a time and place to revolt against the Romans, it would be during the Passover in Jerusalem, because the city was absolutely packed with Jewish pilgrims from all over the Mediterranean world and they're all thinking about Jewish independence.

Every year then, Pilate would pack his bags and head for Jerusalem, and his entrance into the capital city was a highly choreographed military parade. He would ride in on his war horse at the head of an impressive column of imperial cavalry. People would turn out just to see the extraordinary and imposing number of big, strong war horses. Then the foot soldiers would follow, in tight, precise and crisp formations, marching in step. Helmets, and shields and the glint of polished weapons, the squeaking of leather harnesses, the snorting of horses, the tramp of the soldiers' feet, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, the pounding

drums. It was a display of raw and brutal strength, Roman military might marching uncontested, right into the heart of the city . . . and the message was absolutely clear: don't even think about rebelling. Your puny little squads of disorganized, angry men would be put down like rabid dogs. The Romans had superior numbers, weapons, training, logistical support, plenty of experience, and if ever necessary, more reinforcements are right around the corner. The parade proclaimed that Roman rule was absolute, fixed and final.

North Korea loves the old fashioned Soviet style military parade, with hundreds of thousands of soldiers in uniform, ballistic missiles, tanks, fly-overs and the like. And I think the message is not just meant to intimidate and thwart the plans of potential enemies, but also intimidate and thwart those *within* North Korea that would welcome regime change. The message to them is: "take a look; resistance is futile."

I'm thinking of those old newsreels of the armies of Hitler marching into Paris during World War II, inspecting the Eiffel tower as if it were a trophy, or war booty. The Parisians watching on the sidewalks held out their arms in the Nazi salute, but you can tell their hearts were not in it. Their body language gave them away. It was fear, not enthusiasm prompting their salute, and I think Hitler was fine with that and might have even preferred it.

In any event, Jesus would have known about this annual parade of Pilate and his soldiers into Jerusalem, which is probably one reason why his entrance is dramatically different. He came in atop a colt, not a war horse. He more or less rode at the front of the group, but his parade was not composed of finely organized columns of soldiers marching in synch. Rather, it was an unorganized bunch of men and women and children walking alongside him, sometimes behind him, sometimes ahead of him. They were not wearing their military finest. Rather, they wore every day work clothes and sandals. They didn't carry swords or spears and shields, but palm branches. They

weren't stone-faced, silent and serious, like the Roman soldiers. No, those who ushered Jesus in were smiling and laughing and singing. They took off their cloaks and spread them on the road ahead of Jesus, their version of the red carpet. And they also laid down those palm branches shouting "Hosanna, Hosanna" which means "save now, save now."

So, the big question today is, "In which parade do you want to march?" "In which parade are you participating already?" [Confirms, it's a question you will answer today publicly, but it's also a . . .] That's a question that's on the table just about every morning we wake up. "Who are you going to follow this day?"

Pilate made his decision. He was going to climb the ladder of power and authority as high as he could. Being governor of Judea was good, but being governor of a larger and more important territory in the Empire would be better. Being emperor would be the best of all. The more power and authority one has, Pilate thought, the more people you have serving you.

Many today have chosen this same route, and are marching to the beat of the same drums. Having your own cubicle out of college in a profitable company . . . that's good. Having your own office would be better. Having CEO next to your name is better still.

Making varsity is good. Getting lots of play time is better. Setting school records, and receiving all the attention and praise . . . that would be best.

Owning your own house is good. Owning a more prestigious home is better. Having enough to employ servants would be better still.

Paying off your credit cards is good. Building up a healthy savings account is better. Having enough that you don't have to worry about anything is better still.

Did you notice? Our goals are always toward upward mobility, having more of everything, becoming ever more like God, or at least who we think God is, having all power, authority, wealth, prestige, knowledge.

But our Epistle lesson says we should strive to be more like Christ, and he wasn't trying for all his worth to hold on to all those things, but instead emptied himself of those things. He was aiming not for upward mobility, but for downward mobility. Listen again to Philippians 2, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!" Our attitude, as Christians, should be like his. For those who are "in Christ," for those who follow him . . . humility should be our character. Not upward mobility, but downward.

Here's the thing: When Jesus emptied himself and humbled himself, he wasn't renouncing his divinity. He was exercising it. Humility is true to God's nature. By becoming man in order to serve us, Jesus reveals God as God wishes to be known. It's all shockingly ungodlike, as far as our assumptions of God go . . . becoming so weak and vulnerable and humble and focused on the needs of others rather than on his own. But Christ's self-emptying is not out of God's character. Rather, it is the full expression God's divinity. In Jesus, God becomes vulnerable even unto death.

Why is this important? If we have a self-emptying God, then we must be a self-emptying church, a self-emptying people. If the world is to see the true God through us, then we have to show Christ's humility and selflessness and love to the world. It's not about power and might and authority and who wins. It's about humility and service and obedience. A church that doesn't give isn't a church. A Christian that doesn't empty himself in service of others isn't a Christian.

That's what those two parades in ancient Jerusalem teach us. Pilate rode in a war horse; Jesus on a donkey. Pilate came in accompanied by military might, Jesus accompanied mostly by Galilean peasants, women and

children included. Pilate was coming in to maintain the rule of law, Roman law. Jesus was coming in to be obedient to the law of love for others. Pilate valued compliance. Jesus valued forgiveness. Pilate's aim was to intimidate people into fear and respect. The aim of Jesus was to die for people, so that they might have life and salvation.

So which parade are you going to be in? Who are you going to follow this day? It's a question that we answer on a daily basis one way or another. Are we going to be focused on self or on others? On our own needs or the needs of others? To intimidate others with our power and position, or to use whatever power and position we have to serve others?

Remember what Jesus told his disciples: "You know how the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them (that would include Pilate), and their great men exercise authority over them" (the Roman senate, Caesar). "Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Five young men and women are being confirmed this day. It's a big deal, actually, because one of the promises they are making is to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, even unto death.

That's what Jesus did. He lived according to the Word of God even unto death, for you. He remained true to the Father's will, for you. He gave his life as a ransom for you.

Remember how Pilate gave the people a choice? According to custom, at Passover, they could spare the life of a condemned man: either the murderer named Barabbas, or the rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth. They chose Barabbas. Here's the thing: given the same choice, Jesus would have chosen Barabbas too . . . or you, or me. We know this because on the cross, he did that for each of us, taking on your individual sin, all of it, past present and future, to suffer

and die for it. That was not contrary to his nature, his divinity. No, it was the full expression of his nature as God's Son and as our Savior. Thanks be to God. Amen.

