

Today is Palm Sunday so that means we read from one of the four gospels in the New Testament about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. The four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell us stories from the birth of Jesus toward his resurrection.

Each of the four gospels is unique in the stories that they share and how they share it. For instance, Luke tells us the bulk of what we know about the birth of Jesus while the gospel of John tells us nothing about the birth story.

The story of Jesus entering Jerusalem is told by all four gospels. In fact, the narrative of Jesus entering Jerusalem and ending up on the cross is the section of the gospels that are most in agreement with one another. Even though each of the gospels tells the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem, there are some disagreements concerning the details. For instance, did Jesus come in on one animal or were there two animals?

The bulk of the ministry of Jesus occurs outside of Jerusalem in the countryside around the Sea of Galilee. But Jerusalem is the center of power for the Jewish community. At the time of Jesus, however, Jerusalem is under the control and power of the Roman government.

The text that we are about to read occurs during the annual Passover celebration. Passover celebrates the liberation of God's people, the Israelites, from slavery in Egypt that is recorded in the Old Testament book of Exodus. So, you can imagine that this Passover celebration caused some anxiety among the Roman government leaders.

The government leaders needed to make sure to quell any demonstrations against the Roman occupation. As a result, the Roman governor, who ordinarily resided in Caesarea on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the annual Passover celebration.

The governor did not make this journey to take part in Passover but to remind the residents who was in charge. Jerusalem at this moment in time was a busy place with lots of tourists, lots of celebration, and lots of intimidation from the Roman authorities.

“When Governor Pontius Pilate came into Jerusalem, he would enter the city from the west with an excessive show of military pomp and circumstance. He would lead a large group of cavalry and foot soldiers, and ride in on an impressive stallion. One imagines that the inhabitants of the city stand motionless and silent at the street corners; only a few of the tourists are overly excited.

His entry into Jerusalem is clearly a demonstration of the ever-present Roman power.” Think about the grand military parades we see today coming out of Russia or North Korea with displays of large military weapons like bombs and military jets. These types of parades are intended to provoke fear and intimidation.

Contrast the entrance of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate with the entrance that we will read of Jesus.

Read Mark 11:1-11

In contrast to the parade that welcomed Pilate into town with grandiosity and power, the parade that welcomed Jesus into town is marked by humility and service. Rather than a parade to bring intimidation, the parade that welcomes Jesus emphasizes submission and service.

As I was working on this sermon over the past few days, I was aware of two parades that were occurring around me. The first parade was an event that I don't think has ever been described as a parade before. The first parade that I witnessed occurred on the property of this church. It was the parade of volunteers driving trucks and trailers and picking up pine straw and delivering it to residents nearby.

And it truly was a parade. I observed these men and women organize themselves efficiently and orderly as they picked up their delivery tickets in the church kitchen and then drove down to the truck trailer that contained the pine straw. Volunteers inside the truck loaded the pine straw on the trucks and trailers. The trucks drove out of the parking lot and ventured off down the road this way or that way or that way.

I realized in looking at this text that what the volunteers were all doing was participating in a parade. But their parade was not a parade like Pontius Pilate who came into Jerusalem riding on a big stallion. Their parade was like the folks waving palm branches and welcoming a humble servant into their town.

The volunteers with the pine straw sale were giving their time, their energy, their equipment, their gas to serve others. The pine straw sale is not just about delivering pine straw. The pine straw sale is about delivering hospitality and welcome. In the Southern United States, we don't naturally wave palm branches but instead we wave pine straw needles as an act of servanthood.

The second parade I observed is the one that occurred yesterday around the country and even beyond. I am, of course, referring to the "March for our Lives" events. These were the marches or parades that were organized by students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. These young people organized these parades in our nation's capital and around the country and beyond as a cry for help to overcome gun violence in our country.

These students do not represent the powerful that lord intimidation and control over the halls of our legislatures in Washington and around the country. These students represent the ones humbly waving palm branches and welcoming a Savior riding in on a donkey.

These students represent the voices of those who are willing to put their efforts into generating action that truly makes all of us and especially children and youth safe at home and at school. We in the Christian Church should celebrate and encourage these young people as they seek to make a positive difference.

There are lots of parades that we can choose to participate in and encourage. As you are invited to participate in events and philosophies and cliques you are actually being invited into a parade. As you assess whether this is the type of parade that you should support and champion, ask yourself what type of parade this movement or philosophy is.

Is this a movement intended to protect the powerful like Pontius Pilate coming into Jerusalem on a big tall stallion? Or is this a movement based on humility and servanthood like Jesus coming into Jerusalem on a donkey?

What appears to be powerful may, in fact, be an illusion.

The real power, as witnessed by the actions of Jesus, is found in places of servanthood and humility. AMEN.

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-Jarvis, Cynthia, and Elizabeth Johnson, editors, "Feasting on the Gospels: Mark", p. 338.

-Given: March 25, 2018 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)