

Procession

Two processions entered Jerusalem on that spring day in the year 30 A.D. or so.

Enter stage right, from the east, the familiar procession. The one we are here to commemorate today. Jesus on a donkey, followed by his disciples, peasants laying cloaks and branches down before his path.

Enter stage left, from the west, a different procession. Pilate—the Roman governor, the emperor's direct representative, Lord of the region, marching through the city, high on his imperial chariot, soldiers to his left and his right. Swords, helmets. shields gleaming with the reflection of the sun. Horses galloping. Bridles clinking. Drums beating. The swirling of dust.

Every year, the Roman governor would ride up to Jerusalem from his palace on the coast, to be present in the city for the Festival of Passover.

During the festival the city's population swelled. The governor would parade through the city in all of his imperial majesty to remind the Jewish pilgrims that Rome was still in charge. They might be gathered to commemorate an ancient victory against Egypt and

their oppressors, but a real, present-day resistance was futile; Rome was watching.

So if we thought that Jesus' procession was an accident, if we thought his rag-tag parade was a simple coincidence, an act of spontaneous adoration, we would be wrong.

For Jesus, his entrance to the city was a clear, well planned counter-procession, an act of protest, a street drama.

Everything he does, pokes fun at Pilate's grand, imperial, military procession.

Jesus rides into the city on the back of a donkey, not a horse or a chariot, but a donkey with his feet dragging on the ground, kicking up dirt. His disciples gather around him with palm branches, not swords, cloaks, not shields.

As Pilate clanged and crashed his imperial way into Jerusalem from the west, Jesus approached from the east, looking (by contrast) foolish and absurd. While Pilate's procession was of the powerful, the status quo, the empire, Jesus' was the procession of the ridiculous, the powerless, and the explicitly vulnerable.

And the dueling processions were both political and boldly theological.

For Pilate, his procession of military might, of gold and silver, weaponry and pageantry was to give glory to the Emperor alone. For Caesar, the emperor, was Lord and Savior, he was the self-proclaimed Son of God, he was divine. For the politically powerful in Rome, the only God worth worshiping was the Emperor. And everything the Emperor did, the power wielded, the violence exerted, was done with godly authority.

Jesus' mock procession stood in theological contrast. A procession against a domination system created in the name of God, a political and religious system radically different from...the coming reign of God, the dream of God...in which God dwells not in the powerful, but the powerless.

Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory, and violence of the empire that ruled the world; supported by a twisted understanding of God's authority.

Jesus' procession embodied an alternative vision, which is the reality of God's promise.

That's how this holy week begins; how the Christian story takes shape: in a clash of allegiances.

Palm Sunday announces the central conflict of this Holy Week, it's a conflict that continues wherever injustice and violence abound, and it's a conflict that so complicates the hope of an easy Christian life.

For we live in a two procession world. We have long experienced Ceaser-like leaders who, in contrast to the peace and mercy offered by Jesus—establish empires of their own power and violence, while claiming God's blessing and authority.

Palm Sunday is about making a choice—a very public choice—between those two processions; between those two allegiances.

For Jesus and his disciples, their procession through Jerusalem was the moment their faith truly entered the public eye and the stakes became real. It was the moment they took a very public stand against the empire, against violence and oppressive power, against broken theology. It was the moment that the purposes of the Christian faith became clear.

Palm Sunday forever destroys any notion that Christianity is an otherworldly religion, concerned only with life in the hereafter. No on Palm Sunday, Jesus goes public and calls his disciples to live their

lives and make their witness in the world. Here, now.
To make a choice. To pick a side. God's way or
Caesars-Way. God's way or not.

The way of mercy and compassion or the way of
judgment and bitterness. The way of generosity or the
way of scarcity. The way of better together or the way
of going it alone.

The way of the poor or not.

The way of LGBTQ+ youth or not.

The way of black lives or not.

The way of our good creation or not.

For the 21st century Christian, for us, on this Palm
Sunday: the choice is still ever present.

It's for us to choose. Jesus gave his endorsement. It's
up to us to make a decision; to follow.

Palm Sunday just may be the most important day of
the year: a day of two processions, a day when love
confronts power, a day when love loves enough to
become vulnerable, the first day of the week in which
love will die and then destroy death, a day on which
he comes to you and me to invite us to follow, to
make a choice, and to cast our lot with him and his
reign.

If you're ready to join that procession, that kingdom,
say Amen.

*With deep appreciation to Marcus Borg and John
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