

“An Unexpected Parade”

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Readings: Philippians 2. 5 – 11; Matthew 21. 1 – 11

Everyone loves a good parade. The music, the movement, drum majors (and majorettes), the floats festooned with banners, bicycles draped with crepe, marching bands, clowns and jugglers, fire trucks all clean and shiny, the mayor riding in the back of a convertible, and—in Wisconsin at least, where I grew up—an endless line of tractors and farm equipment. What’s not to love about all this? Having grown up where I did, in a midwestern town—to echo Garrison Keillor’s description of Lake Wobegon in *Prairie Home Companion*, “where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average”—we did parades!

They were—and remain—one of the great civic moments that bind us across our differences in small towns scattered across America. They invite us to set aside whatever ails us: disagreements over town politics, ambitions driven by political differences, and the endless petty squabbles we indulge in: all this falls away at the first sound of the drum corps and a glimpse of the high school band leading the way.

[story by Allen and Sally Fernald about a parade they remember]

The point of a parade is not simply all the festive displays that delight our sense of pageantry. Parades exist to celebrate some higher goal, some common tie that binds us. It might be the nation, on the Fourth of July. Or the opulent extravagance of the Macy’s Thanksgiving Parade or the Rose Bowl Parade. Or, on a more local level, an event celebrating the town, like the “Christmas by the Sea” parade here in Camden. Or, a celebration of returning heroes—a championship team, perhaps, or the honoring of veterans on Memorial Day. We gather along the roads to celebrate and honor achievements larger than those of our own smaller circle of family and friends. Our differences fade for a few hours, and we find ourselves belonging to something larger, and perhaps more noble, than we are on our own. Parades remind us of an honor that somehow elevates and delights us in the process.

Now, the story we heard this morning, depicting “Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem,” was really a parade of sorts. No, there were no marching bands, no floats, no firetrucks. But it was

a celebration of a hero, if of a different sort than we usually imagine. And it is staged on a road leading from a nearby village into the holy city of Jerusalem, the center of Israel's life.

The story is simple enough. Jesus has been moving slowly through the villages and towns of Galilee, and had left Jericho—a city we might remember from the children's song, "Joshua fought the battle of Jericho. . .and the walls came tumbling down. . ."—on a road of some fifteen miles, leading to Jerusalem. As they neared the village of Bethphage, on the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem, Jesus sends two of his followers ahead, telling them to find a donkey there, untie it, and bring it to him.

The story, as it appears with little variation in each of the four gospels, focuses on a saying taken from the prophet Zechariah, located near the end of our Old Testament. Here, the prophet speaks to a nation defeated and occupied, offering an oracle that holds the promise of the restoration of Judah and Israel. Each of the gospels includes part of that oracle, in words that offered a vanquished people hope of freedom and a restoration of their dignity:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
Triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey.
(Zechariah 9.9)

But here is the rub: this restoration is not to come about through the reinstatement of political power or military might. This "king" who is now to come is one who "will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be cut off, *and he shall command peace to the nations*" (Zech. 9.10). It is an image of what we might think of as an anti-hero, one who stills our penchant toward achieving power over others and leads to a peaceable kingdom.

It is the vision the apostle Paul puts forth in his letter to the Philippians where he calls the small community there to take "the same mind. . .that was in Christ, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. . ." (Phil. 2.5f.). This is the "king" who comes to us, who, though "triumphant and victorious," comes "humble and riding on a donkey." And this is the unexpected parade we find in the depiction of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on the day we now call "Palm Sunday."

For if this is a scene that has rightly been described as "Jesus' triumphant entry" into the great city of Jerusalem, he does so humbled as no "king" or despot would imagine doing. He

does not take a warhorse as his means of entering, but a simple beast of burden, a donkey. And the people who come do not cheer as they might if they saw a champion of power approaching. They called out with the ancient invocation, “Hosanna,” which in Hebrew gave voice to a joyous acclamation, meaning “O save us!” And they added to this a claim from one of the psalms, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Ps. 118.26).

Here is the heart of this unexpected parade: to come in service, to give oneself in humility to serving those longing for help, this is what it means to come “in the name of the Lord.” It is a call not simply to Jesus, but to all of those—and to us among them—who seek to have “the mind of Christ,” What will this look like? “If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy,” this is the “mind” we are to have among ourselves, “do[ing] nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility regard[ing] others as better than [ourselves]. . . , [looking] to the interests of others.”

This is the heart of the ancient Christian story, one rooted in the still older traditions of Israel: each of us is invited, with Jesus, to live our lives “in the name of the Lord,” as those for whom life is an unsurpassable gift, given to us in order that we might give of ourselves to others. It is a story Paul recalls in suggesting that Jesus’ way was to “empty himself” of the prerogative of divine power and serve others, in humility. It is a story of God’s “fall” into human form in this servant, Jesus of Nazareth, a different story of the “fall” from the one Christians have come to attribute to the creation story in Genesis.

And this “fall” is one reminding us of our own story, of the way in which God invites us to “come in the name of the Lord.” The great genius of the early 14th century, Meister Eckhart, loved to remind us that each of us is called to be “the beloved son. . .the beloved daughter, in whom God is well pleased.” And each of us is invited to remember that we discover this “open secret” about ourselves not in achieving power, but in our “fall” in humility and service.

Here is how he put it, reframed in a short poem I entitled simply “Letting Go”:

I don’t like the dark.
I’d rather be clothed
than naked.

Yet You tell me
I must let go of all that
clothes me—

my joys and fears,

my worries and even
my imaginings—

and give myself
to the dark emptiness
where You wait

to be born in me.

[in Mark S. Burrows and Jon M. Sweeney, *Meister
Eckhart's Book of the Heart*, 53]

This is what we find ourselves invited to grasp in our lives, a note of encouragement for us in this unsettled time of the COVID19 pandemic. But what a reversal Eckhart imagines for us, who expect that we must fill ourselves up with power, achieving something like greatness, to be the ones in whom God wishes to be “born.” No, it is in letting go of our need to control our lives. It is in relinquishing our demand for privilege. It is in giving ourselves to that “dark emptiness” in the heart of who we are that God “waits,” as Eckhart imagines it, to be born in us.

This is the expectation at the heart of what we have come to call the “communion service,” which we will shortly celebrate, “virtually,” with each other. It, too, is a kind of “unexpected parade,” one that binds us together in our commitment to something larger than ourselves. For when we share in the simple element of bread, and drink from the cup of mercy, we remember that Jesus is in our midst. In our emptiness. In our humiliation. And, yes, in our service of others. It is an occasion when we might well call out, today, as the Israelites did who gathered along that road from Jericho to Jerusalem, “Hosanna!” “O save us” who come “in the name of our Lord”!