

## “Between Shouting & Silence”

Luke 19:29-40

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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In the days leading up to the Jewish Passover, there were two parades making their way into Jerusalem. We just read the story about the one with which we are most familiar – the story of how Jesus rode down from the Mount of Olives and into the city from the east. That is the story we tell each Palm Sunday – the story with which we begin Holy Week. We know that story. But you may not know about the other parade. So let me tell you what was happening across the city.

There, entering Jerusalem from the west, was an imperial procession – a royal parade – with Pontius Pilate, the Governor of Judea, riding into town in splendor, accompanied by his army. Pilate, you see, didn't live in Jerusalem. He lived in the Governor's mansion about 60 miles away in a beautiful coastal town known as Caesarea on the Sea. Jerusalem wasn't Pilate's kind of place, really, with its primarily Jewish population and their religious devotion and religious wrangling. He ruled the territory in which Jerusalem was located, but he stayed away from there as much as possible. However in the days leading up to Passover, the Governor needed to be in the city. And here's why:

Passover, you may recall, was the Jewish holiday that celebrated the people's escape from Egypt, where they had been enslaved. Each Passover, Jewish families met (as they still do to this day) to tell the story of how God had delivered them from the Pharaoh and his armies – how God had led them safely through the Sea of Reeds and then had drowned the Egyptian army and chariots when they pursued them. Passover was a time when the Jewish people celebrated their freedom. But, in the days when Jesus lived, they still were not truly free. They lived in what their ancestors had called the “Promised Land”, but they also lived under Roman oppression. They were subject to Rome, much to their displeasure. And so the Roman government always kept a close eye on Jerusalem when Passover rolled around. They knew how easily a rebellion might erupt during such a celebration – how easily a people whose central story was one of freedom from oppression might turn against their oppressors. And Rome didn't want trouble.

So Pontius Pilate made his way into Jerusalem each year, a few days before Passover, with all the pomp and circumstance befitting his office. He rode a stately steed, accompanied by his cavalry and foot soldiers. The entourage displayed weapons and banners and played drums to announce their approach. There was nothing subtle about their arrival in Jerusalem. Pilate wanted the people of the city to know that he was there. He wanted the fearsome presence of the Roman army to put an end to any thoughts of a Jewish rebellion.

Jesus knew all about the annual imperial parade, of course. Anyone familiar with Jerusalem knew that Rome went to great lengths to exert its authority in the days before Passover. And so he did something outrageous. He organized a protest. He told his disciples to go to a nearby village and get a colt that he had arranged to borrow. They did what they were told, found the colt, and brought it to him. Then they threw their

cloaks on the colt and set Jesus on it for a ride down the Mount of Olives and up into the city of Jerusalem. It was the Jesus parade – an alternative procession – where the reign of God, and not the reign of Rome, was on display.

Jesus could have walked into Jerusalem, of course. He was just a mile or so away. He could have been there on foot in less than an hour. But he didn't arrange this colt ride just for transportation. He did it in a highly symbolic and challenging act that those around him would have understood. He did it to challenge the authorities of his time, both religious and political, standing in opposition to the establishment that cared more about the rules than about the people – more about legalities than about love. As he climbed on that colt and rode down the hill, Jesus was staging a demonstration. It was a parody of the imperial powers of his day. Instead of heralding the kingdom of Rome, the kingdom of the emperor, Jesus rode into town with an alternative vision – a vision of the reign of God.

Not a grand war horse, but a humble colt.

Not national flags, but palm branches waving in the air;

Not an armed band of soldiers, but simple peasants accompanying him;

Not shouts of "Hail, Caesar!" but rather "Hosanna to the son of David."

It was a provocative parade.

The Jesus parade started off with crowds praising God. It began with the people shouting, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" But as the journey continued, as one day turned into the next, the crowds began to fall off. By Thursday evening, Judas, one of Jesus' disciples, had left this parade to join the parade on the other side of town. Later that same night, it was Simon Peter who dropped out. By Friday, most of the rest were nowhere to be found. Only the women and the "beloved disciples" remained at the cross. Shouting turned to silence and abject horror.

The Jesus parade, it turns out, was a difficult place to be. It was a procession that challenged the empire, and that defied religious authorities as well when they turned from God's ways to their own. It was a procession that led to a showdown in the courts of the temple and the courts of the emperor. And you know what happened there. You know what happened to Jesus.

These two parades – the parade that symbolizes the reign of God, and the parade that symbolizes the empire of Rome – are still with us, aren't they? The contrast is as stark today as it was two thousand years ago. In humility, Jesus rides a colt, calling us to trust in God above all else – above all others – but there is another parade across town that calls us to trust in the imperial powers of our own time. And we each have the freedom to choose the parade we will join. Will we walk with Jesus or with Pilate? Will we commit ourselves to the reign of God or the reign of the emperor? If that sounds like a no-brainer, let me remind you of the challenge that Christian Nationalism presents in our own time and place. Millions of so-called Christians have chosen to join Pilate's parade.

This Holy Week, let us recommit ourselves to that other parade – the parade that leads to life and love through the surprising path of the cross. Let us walk with Jesus wherever he leads us, even when that path seems dark and dangerous. Let us join together this Thursday evening to remember Jesus' last meal with his disciples and to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion. Let us continue the journey on Friday as we remember Jesus' suffering and death. It is only then, after we have dared to follow the

Jesus parade to the darkest places of life, that we will truly understand the meaning of Christ's resurrection – the ultimate vindication of the Jesus parade.  
And let the people say, Amen.