

Roll Down Justice: Who Is This?

Matthew 21 :1-17

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

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Everyone loves a parade, right? The energy, the excitement, the fun! Who can resist a Saturday afternoon watching from the curb as homemade floats made of colored napkins and poster board slowly pass by, young band members strive to coordinate playing music and keeping in step, and clowns throw candy to the excited crowds?

Of course, our human penchant for parading stems back long before our modern version of the hometown street parade. In fact, according to History Daily, the earliest known parades “date all the way back to pre-history, with Spanish cave paintings depicting crowds cheering as hunters brought back their prey”. Throughout much of history, parades have marked important religious holidays or military victories. Still today, they serve as tools for communication, sending messages to those who watch about what is important or who has power. Through those messages, they help create a common sense of purpose or identity.

Today is Palm Sunday and we are wrapping up our sermon series entitled “Roll Down, Justice” in which we have been exploring the relationship between Jesus, justice, and faith. That relationship is profoundly expressed in Jesus’s triumphant parade into Jerusalem for the Passover. We all enjoy Matthew’s description of Palm Sunday as we imagine the excitement in the air when Jesus rode along on the back of a young donkey, people placing their coats and palm branches on the road in front of him, children pushing in front to see him! All the people shouting, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”

Now, two thousand years later, what sometimes gets lost in our celebrations of that parade is the irony of what was happening. The messages sent and the values conveyed. Because with his donkey ride into Jerusalem, Jesus communicates some very important things about God and justice to those who watch. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus carefully planned the details of his procession beforehand. He made arrangements to borrow a donkey, gave the disciples instructions on how to acquire it, and orchestrated his parade to happen on the same day as another parade - the arrival of Pilate in Jerusalem for the Passover.

In a blog post he wrote about Palm Sunday a few years ago, Marcus Borg reminded us that “every year the Roman governor of Judea, whose residence was on the coast, rode up to Jerusalem in order to be present in the city in case there were riots at Passover, the most politically volatile of the annual Jewish festivals. With him came soldiers and cavalry to reinforce the imperial garrison in Jerusalem. It is clear what Pilate’s procession was about. By proclaiming the pomp and power of empire, its purpose was to intimidate.”

Jesus orchestrated his parade as a parody of Pilate’s grandiosity and pomp and circumstance. While Pilate arrives on horseback with soldiers surrounding him, Jesus enters the city on the back of a donkey accompanied by peasants and commoners. While Pilate’s parade is meant to intimidate, Jesus means to make people laugh in joyful defiance of the Roman empire. And while Pilate seeks to reinforce his power, Jesus has designed his to echo the words of Zechariah 9:9-10:

“Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

“He 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” (9.10).

While Pilate positions himself as a man of power and dominance, Jesus intentionally enters Jerusalem presenting himself as a gentle, humble king of peace.

So, this is the context when the residents of Jerusalem hear the noise and shouts of a parade outside their doors. They know it can't be Pilate's parade - he would enter the city from the other side. No wonder they ask, “Who is this?”

Who is this man poking fun at the empire which dominates their lives and country? Who is this who inspires peasants and commoners to rush to his side calling Hosanna - a word of praise which also translates to mean “Save us! Save us!” This question - “Who is Jesus?” - is perhaps the most important question we can ask as we begin the journey into Holy Week, as we seek a faith in God that makes sense to us, and as we explore God's call to justice.

Of course, Jesus is many different things to many different people. A few years ago, Diana Butler Bass, one of the most well-regarded Christian writers of our time, published a book entitled, “Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence”, in which she “explores the many images of Jesus we encounter in our lifetimes - and how we make theology from the text of our lives in conversation with scripture and tradition”. The book is in part a memoir as she draws on the images of Jesus that have been meaningful for her at different ages and stages of her life. As a young child, she understood Jesus as a friend as she sang “Jesus loves me this I know”. As a student, she embraced Jesus as a teacher. As she continued to grow, her concept of Jesus evolved and changed as she did.

Of course, this is true for many of us. How we understand Jesus becomes increasingly nuanced as our lives unfold. The Jesus we read about in scripture becomes real to us. We know Jesus as healer when we experience grief or loss. We come to know Jesus as savior as we grapple to understand the relationship between his life, his death, and our human tendency toward sin. We recognize Jesus as Wise One when we read his words over and over during our lifetimes, yet each time learn something new from them.

However, there are also those who distort images of Jesus to serve their own purposes. They do not draw these images from scripture but impose their own values on them. For example, on January 6, 2021, as protestors stormed the U.S. capitol building, they carried posters of a white, fair-haired Jesus wearing a red MAGA hat as if he endorsed the values of those who seek to make America great again. Others see Jesus as their personal savior but only if they determine for themselves the conditions of their own salvation. And still others will explain their right to control, dominate, judge, exclude, enslave, even kill as somehow their expression of their love for Jesus.

So, I think it is important for those of us whose hairs stand on end when we see a poster declaring “Jesus saves” at a gun rights rally to know and understand one other fundamental characteristic of Jesus. When the residents of Israel ask “Who is this?”, his disciples and followers answer, “This is Jesus, the prophet”.

In Israelite tradition, a prophet was one who was called to speak for God and to act on God’s behalf. The word “prophet” comes from the Greek *prophetes* meaning “one who speaks for another”. In biblical prophecy, the prophet’s role was not to warn of events coming in the distant future, but to communicate God’s message for today and call the people to immediate response.

If we want to understand what justice is in God’s eyes, we look to Jesus. Not only is his parade on Palm Sunday a commentary on the Roman Empire’s abuse of power, he goes on that day to critique the temple authorities, as well.

At the end of the parade, Jesus arrives at the temple courts where he drives out all the people who are buying and selling there, overturning the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves for sacrifices. “It is written,” he says to them, “‘My house will be called ‘a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’” You see, the Torah requirement that people bring sacrifices to the temple had led to massive corruption among temple officials and merchants. After traveling long distances to worship at the temple, peasants were told their sacrifices weren’t worthy of offering to God and compelled to buy “temple-approved” animals to sacrifice rather than those they brought from home. When they went to exchange money, they were charged exorbitant exchange rates. The temple authorities were allowing the poorest among them, the very people God calls us to care for, to be taken advantage of by a greedy system of extortion which in no way resembled a house of prayer.

After calling them to account, Jesus then went on to heal the blind and the lame, those who temple officials cast out, leaving them to survive by begging. And finally, he celebrated the voices of children and dared to suggest that they were singing his praise as their Lord.

These are the words and actions of a prophet. How will we, Christ’s followers, act on them in our world today? Where do we see misuse of power, poor people cheated out of money, strangers cast out, the sick and lame left untreated, and the children marginalized? How will we respond?

These are the questions we face as we enter this Holy Week. How will we demonstrate through our behavior that to follow Jesus is to live in love, to beat swords into plowshares, to protect the most vulnerable, and stand up with the oppressed?

May it be so. Amen.