

Parade or March

As I began preparing for this Palm Sunday and looking at the readings which also include those directed toward the themes of the events which occur later in the week, I noticed the substitution of a reading from Luke in place of a Hebrew Scripture. There was no Hebrew Scripture reading listed for Palm Sunday; instead the reading was Luke's description of how Jesus sets the stage for this entry into the city and the entry into Jerusalem itself. I thought about how often we view the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem as a celebration, a type of parade and we populate that entry with scenes drawn from our understandings about parades with which we are familiar. Of course, there are also scenes which Hollywood has created for us. Our texts often insert subtitles between chapters and paragraphs which are not part of the original documents. These insertions are interpretations of the texts made by those who have done the translations. In the portions of the gospel narratives about this event, these insertions indicate that Jesus made a triumphal entry into Jerusalem which was the capital city of that Roman occupied province. We often have taken this image from our own versions of parades. We then have created our own parades within the sanctuary with waving palm branches and shouts of hosanna. We also tend to conflate the gospel narratives and fail to appreciate that in this particular account--there are no palm branches being waved. Because of our journey through the season of Lent, we know that Jesus has set his face toward this destination and what await there; because we are Easter people, we know the resurrection comes, because Luke writes his narrative after the resurrection, he knows the resurrection comes, but when Jesus makes that entry into Jerusalem, those in the crowd—they do not know what God is doing among them for them; they do not know how their salvation is being accomplished. Our text this morning from Luke comes from the 19th Chapter and follows after Jesus has gone to eat with Zacchaeus the tax collector in Jericho. From chapter 19: 11 after that encounter, we learn this about those who are journeying with Jesus toward Jerusalem—"As they were listening to this, he went on to tell them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately." Now we know that Jesus has told them what to expect. In fact, it is recorded that three times he has said plainly. We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be delivered over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again." But no part of that vision of God's redemption plan matched theirs. So when we think of this entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, was it a parade? If, it was a parade, what was the purpose in the mind of the crowd? In the mind of Jesus? Parades are usually events which are held in celebration—to commemorate something important that is happening or that has happened in the past—to validate it. Parades can be used to unify a culture or to impress upon a population the might and power of the ruling government. The reading from Zechariah 9: 9-13 is one which had long been a part of the Jewish tradition seen as a vision by the prophet which described deliverance--the coming of a future king of Israel who would be triumphant and victorious, who would set the prisoners free—who would come to them humbly riding on a donkey. It is clear from the opening of our text that Jesus, fully aware of that tradition, is carefully setting up the entry into Jerusalem with this as a pattern. Luke 19: 29-34—"When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place

called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' Just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" The narrative tells us that Jesus plans this entry knowing that those who accompany him are expecting something different from the gathering that will occur during this momentous week of Passover in Jerusalem. And although the gospel accounts do not go into detail about the events surrounding the entry, as the story develops these conditions are there in the background. Although not stated, all in the city who heard about the Jesus' entry knew of the events occurring at the main gate and the reasons for them. Those events are there in the background. It is the week of the Passover and in the weeks leading up to Passover, thousands of Jewish pilgrims stream into Jerusalem. As they gather these large crowds from all over the Jewish Diaspora, they are there to remember and to celebrate their history—a history of deliverance—a history which represented a journey from oppression to freedom—a ritual where they leave the door ajar and an empty chair at the table for Elijah because when Elijah comes, then finally the Messiah is on his way and God's will be done on earth...And as they come into the city with their hopes of liberation from Roman oppression, release of the captive from the occupying empire, rumors flew and secret plans for revolution are whispered. Many Jews are looking for the arrival of Messiah, a kingly person anointed by God to bring freedom. The occupying Roman military government grew skittish and made special preparations increasing their presence in Jerusalem. Near Passover, the governor entered the city gates on a warhorse, traveling in an impressive procession of horses and men, decked with glinting sword, Roman shields, and imperial red uniforms. Jesus, knowing the expectations of all the crowds coming into Jerusalem, sets the stage for his own entry as a counter point to the one made at the main gate. When Jesus enters Jerusalem, two things are happening, paradoxically, at the same time. First, as the details he has carefully staged proclaim, he is claiming the authority of the Messiah. And secondly, he is enacting a piece of political theater, making a joke on Rome by staging a parody of an imperial parade. He is demonstrating that his power is not at all the kind of power exercised by the Roman occupiers, and not exactly the kind of power anyone expected in a Messiah. In fact, Jesus is making a statement about power with which we still have some difficulty understanding. Those who enter Jerusalem with Jesus are coming into the city as part of a group which has been traveling with him. The text describes their entry this way: "as he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen." For this crowd as they go with Jesus into the city it seems to them that all their hopes are coming to fruition...they have seen him healing the sick, the blind, the leper, casting out demons....doing great deeds of power. It is in this detail that Luke's account differs most from the other gospels. For those who enter with Jesus are "the whole multitude of the disciples". They are not waving palm branches which carried with them the symbol of victory by a conqueror; instead they are spreading their cloaks on the road and praising God joyfully. They are offering testimony to the deeds of power they have witnessed saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Of course, to them this must mean that now they had a deliverer; their long awaited Messiah and Savior, King Jesus was with

them. The power that he had would surely be used as they expected—to rescue them—to deliver them from the oppression under which they lived. Although Jesus does use power to redeem—the way the power is used is not as any of those present that day expected. In Jesus, the power wielded had nothing to do with force or coercive means. In Jesus, divine power has more to do with love, knowledge and loyalty. When Jesus staged his entry into Jerusalem, all the power of the known world lay centered in Rome and came marching in through the main gate. Jesus entered at a lesser gate, with a smaller crowd who would in fact, despite their loud praises on this day, desert him in the coming days. Yet all of Rome's power did not have the final say that week. But in our culture today, I sometimes wonder about how Jesus would look at the way we understand power. With his life and ministry, with his teachings, with his very public entry into Jerusalem, Jesus issued a challenge to the Roman way of coercive power. That was not the way he taught. This year, Palm Sunday, seems to me more like a protest march than a triumphant parade; a challenge to witness to the courage of the followers of Christ to worship the One who knows that divine power is found in love for one another. When the Pharisees in the crowd, those keepers of the law, said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop. He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." On this Palm Sunday, in whose parade do we stand? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.