

“What Do We Make of This Processional”

Mark 11:1–11

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Processionals are not easy to pull off in this sanctuary. We have a center aisle, but in other churches I have served, the ministers and choir process on Palm Sunday and Easter. It’s a bit tricky for the choir to process if they are singing in the loft. We have considered using zip cords and trampolines, but some choir members might not make it, and we could end up with a shortage in one section or another...

Our children did manage a processional quite wonderfully this morning, and we DO process at the Hanging of the Greens service, though even there we have had issues. One year the youth went the wrong way and ended up taking an extra loop around the sanctuary, sort of a victory lap in advance of their singing! Processionals can be energizing and celebratory, but they can also be challenging, they can go off the rails quite easily.

This being the case, what do we make of Jesus’ processional entry into Jerusalem we remember on Palm Sunday? We often call it triumphal, but it’s not really. In fact, it’s odd that it happens at all. Some scholars have suggested that this could never have happened. The Romans would never have allowed anyone not authorized by them to enter town to a hero’s welcome. Perhaps Jesus and his followers were killed in their camp on the edge of town.

But just taking the story as we have it, what do we make of Jesus’ procession? Does it go as planned or does it come off the rails? In his commentary on Mark, New Testament scholar Alan Culpepper says that Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem follows the well-established pattern of accounts of entrance processions in many ways but also alters this pattern in some ways (*Mark*, Smyth and Helwys Commentary, p. 367f).

Referencing the work of Paul Brooks Duff, he summarizes the elements of traditional processions. The conqueror/ruler is escorted into

the city by the citizenry or army of the conqueror. The procession is accompanied by hymns and/or acclamations. In Roman tradition, the authority of the one entering is underscored in symbolic ways. And then, the entrance ends with some ritual appropriation, such as a sacrifice made in the temple.

So, how does Jesus' procession square with all of this? He enters with an escort but not by an army, by his ragtag group of followers — fishermen and tax collectors, people who don't know who they are following, some women from Galilee, perhaps a once-blind beggar. There are hymns and acclamations, the recitation of psalms and prophetic hope — Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Elements of the entry symbolize Jesus' authority — the colt fulfills Zechariah 9:9, branches and cloaks are thrown down as in 2 Kings 9:13, and Jesus is linked to King David, but he will be a different kind of king, as our hymn of discipleship says, “the king a cross will hold.” Then, the story ends not with any ritual act but in a rather anticlimactic way. After all the build-up, the text says, “and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.”

This is not a triumphal entry because the triumph is yet to come, and it happens not in the customary military way but through a death on a cross. Jesus isn't taking a victory lap, like our youth at the Hanging of the Greens. His actions and Mark's presentation of them tell us that he will be a different kind of Messiah — not a nationalistic one as many anticipate, and not one who conquers by killing, a humble servant who triumphs by dying. Alan Culpepper says Mark's use of irony pushes us to reflect on this last ultimate irony, a victory achieved through death.

That's what this procession is about, that's what this day is about; there is an element of celebration, but there is an even greater call to reflection. What does this ironic tale that ends with Jesus wandering off back to Bethany say about him, and what are the implications for us?

Not surprisingly at this point, what the story says about Jesus is consistent with what we have been seeing throughout this Lenten season.

We may think this is obvious, something we learned as children in Sunday School — that neither the powers that be nor the people who claimed to follow Jesus could embrace the kind of vision he had for love and justice, that Jesus would have to die for our sins and to begin movement toward the beloved community. But no one at the time gets any of this, not Jesus' closest friends and followers, not the crowds of people who are attracted to any charismatic leader who comes along, certainly not the religious and political leaders of the day who would be threatened by Jesus, if they took him seriously, which they don't.

No one gets it at the time, and the truth is many struggle to get it to this day. Many people in the church will quickly parrot the phrase, "Jesus died for my sins," but at the very same time hold on to a triumphal approach to faith. The evangelical church in our culture talks a lot about the blood of Jesus and then presumes to force belief in him on others, tries to establish a national religion, talks in ways that evoke images of the crusades and at times Nazi Germany.

The Jesus we see on Palm Sunday is not coercive, he doesn't embrace triumphalism, he has no interest in national religion, his way is sacrificial and self-giving. The fact that he comes in on a colt and not a stallion tells us all we need to know. This is not a gloating star soaking in adoration at the Final Four. This is a humble physician volunteering time at a free clinic. This is a persevering teacher patiently going about work in the classroom while receiving criticism when gratitude is deserved. This is a courageous soul protesting injustice and oppression and then being hauled away and put in jail.

To be sure, the end of this story is not the end of THE Story. Resurrection will follow crucifixion. But at the end of this scene, Jesus is not seated in a place of importance, receiving adoration and praise. The bad guys and gals are not all run out of town. Rather, Jesus leads his followers back to a village just outside the holy city because he knows what is coming next. It is a cross, not a coronation.

What this implies for us is again something we have been considering throughout Lent, that we are called to shape our lives after this pattern of humble self-giving. Jesus didn't just die for our sins, he

died to show us how to live. His story shapes our story, or at least this is God's desire, that we follow Jesus in this distinctive way of life.

It is why the Apostle Paul says this to the church at Philippi. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross (Philippians 2:5-8)."

Let the same mind be in you... humbling yourself and becoming obedient... to the point to death. There is no triumphalism here, no gloating or coercion, no arrogance or imposition, only humble service to human need, in God's name, following the example of Jesus.

In an article included in this month's issue of *The Christian Century* Lutheran minister Yvette Schock presents a 2,000-year-old Mishnah that describes a very different kind of procession into the temple in Jerusalem, one that reflects the character of Jesus' life and ministry, even if it isn't exactly how he processed on what we call Palm Sunday (p. 27). This Mishnah, an ancient oral Jewish teaching, instructs pilgrims on their first visit to the temple.

After climbing the steps to the Temple Mount, they come to an arched entryway, pass through it into a courtyard, and then either turn right or left. The normal pattern is to turn to the right, move around the edges of the courtyard counterclockwise, and then exit the way they came in. But there are different instructions for pilgrims who arrive at the temple "brokenhearted." These pilgrims are to climb the stairs the same way as other pilgrims, but when they reach the arch, they are to turn to the left and move around the temple clockwise.

This may sound like a set-up for chaos, the kind of chaos we seek to avoid when we celebrate communion by intinction or impose ashes on Ash Wednesday. But when pilgrims traveling in opposite directions meet, those coming from the right are to ask, "What has happened to you?" The brokenhearted person is to share the reason for their sorrow. After listening, the pilgrim from the right is to give a blessing to the person in sorrow, and then both continue on their way.

We don't know if this is how it was done in Jesus' time, but it fits the character of his journey. He was always stopping to listen to people in need and then offering them a blessing. Even as he reached the end of his journey, he was thinking about others, not himself.

Perhaps if we want to create an ideal processional for this day, this is what we should do — wander around this room in some way that allows people who are hurting to tell their story and seek some kind of healing and peace. More importantly, this is how we are called to live, as we follow the One who laid down life for others, ever seeking out the brokenhearted and offering a blessing.

We are called to meet the brokenhearted and downtrodden, the poor and oppressed, the rejected and marginalized wherever they are, listen to their stories, and offer some form of blessing. When we do, the world will proclaim, "Hosanna! Blessed is the One who started all of this! Blessed is God's realm of love and justice!"