

## **“Palm Sunday as Parade, Protest, and Proclamation”**

**Matthew 21:1–11**

**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**

**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**

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Most of us love parades, especially when we are children. They are far better in person than on television, but they are fun and festive, filled with color and movement, and they often include food and music. When our children were young, the Mickey Mouse parade at Disney World was near the top of the list, though by the time the main attraction arrived, we were exhausted, at least the adults were.

Many of us have great memories of the Raleigh Christmas parade. The Grinch outfit I wore to several Toy Joys came from a float in that parade sponsored by a company Dana worked for at the time. Our church has given out hot chocolate and biscuits. There was a tragedy several years ago, but for the most part, joy prevails as we celebrate life, even knowing it has its more difficult moments.

Writing for this month’s issue of *The Christian Century* Episcopal rector Katie Kirk-Costas suggests that Palm Sunday is a kind of parade (March 2026, p. 28). Parades, she says, interrupt the ordinary with childlike wonder. We bring out the best outfits and all our props, with branches and musical instruments. We process as Jesus processes into Jerusalem, and whether we know it or not, we are following a script.

Jesus enters Jerusalem in fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy of a king entering on a donkey, and on a colt. The people shout “Hosanna!” which is Aramaic for “Save (or help), I pray!” and it is taken from Psalm 118:25 which is part of the Hallel liturgy of the Feast of Tabernacles and is accompanied by the waving of branches. Sound familiar? As is often the case, Jesus is building on tradition as he enters town, and we build on this same tradition with our celebration today.

It does seem like an odd time to have a parade. Jesus is on his way to the cross. As Katie Kirk-Costas notes, we are following Jesus’ hearse today. But perhaps this is just the time when we need a parade. It is a way of laughing in the face of death, proclaiming that life will ultimately prevail. “If

we're stuck on a ship and it's sinking," sings Frank Turner in a folk punk ballad, "then we might as well have a parade." I can't quote all the words of "Love, Ire, and Song" here, but it ends like this.

Darling, just for one day,  
we can fight and we can win,  
And if only for a little while,  
We could insist on the impossible.  
Leave the mourning to the morning: pain can be killed  
With aspirin tablets and vitamin pills.  
But memories of hope, and of glorious defeat,  
Are a little bit harder to beat.

If we're stuck on a ship and it's sinking, then we might as well have a parade... memories of hope, and of glorious defeat, are a little bit harder to beat. Perhaps this is part of what is happening on Palm Sunday.

If it is, what might the implications be for us? How might we laugh in the face of death? I think of the years Dana took our previous female German Shepherd to see oncology patients at Baptist Hospital in Winston-Salem. Kira was the first therapy pet they allowed to visit, and she was always a reminder of ordinary life for people whose days were shaped by illness and death, but at Christmas she would walk the halls with antlers on, looking like a reindeer. To be honest, I'm not sure Kira loved the look or feel, but she was a delight to see, a four-legged parade all by herself, proclaiming that there is more than illness and death!

How might we proclaim this sacred truth — that life prevails over death, resurrection follows crucifixion, justice and love overcome hatred and fear? What parade might we start on an oncology wing, near a jail or prison, in our most impoverished communities, near our national borders, where war is raging, where suffering and death seem to have the upper hand? It seems like a Palm Sunday kind of thing to do.

But Palm Sunday is not just a kind of parade; it is an act of protest. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan have documented this reality. Roughly 40,000 people live in Jerusalem, but up to 200,000 pilgrims come for

the celebration of Passover. So, the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, makes his way over from his beach home in Caesaria Maritima to the small mountain where Jerusalem is located to make sure order is kept. He is a “law and order” kind of guy who rides on a mighty stallion and is accompanied by many soldiers — a show of force reminding people of the power of Rome. “Don’t mess with us!” his entrance says.

But at the other end of town, there is a second grand entrance made by none other than Jesus himself. Yes, there are two processions this day, not one, and the fact that Jesus enters at all, as if he is some kind of royalty, is an outrage to the authorities. But the way Jesus enters is even more offensive. He comes not on a mighty beast but on a donkey and a colt, humble animals signifying servitude, not power. There are no soldiers with weapons accompanying him, no show of force.

Everything Jesus does screams disrespect for the Romans. It is an act of protest. He is not just challenging the religious leaders of his day; he is challenging the powers and principalities of his world. His mission is spiritual, but it has political overtones as well.

Thus, someone has said that while “All Glory, Laud, and Honor” is an appropriate song for this day, we should remember that we are singing it not to any worldly power but to Jesus as our redeemer king. It should have the feel of “We Shall Overcome” or “Lift Every Voice and Sing” and not some national hymn. Bob Dylan is our song leader, not Kate Smith — no offense to the latter, she lived her final years in Raleigh, in our neighborhood, I am told. But this is a day of protest and defiance.

I realize that saying this flies in the face of a certain narrative in the contemporary American church which maintains that anything bordering on the social or political is off-limits. But while avoiding partisan stances and honoring the historic Baptist belief in the separation of church and state seem wise, a complete avoidance of the social and political is impossible to square with the life and ministry of Jesus.

His way can be messy, if not downright dangerous. Matthew says the whole city is stirred, is in turmoil; indeed, the people tremble. Well they should, this will get Jesus killed, but it is the path he chooses.

The implication for us is that acts of protest are not necessarily off-limits. In fact, at times they are a central part of how we follow Jesus.

Homiletics professor Veronice Miles lists a number of occasions where people of faith have taken action in response to justice concerns – women and men providing safe passage on the Underground Railroad for persons seeking freedom from slavery in mid-nineteenth century America; Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others in the Confessing Church who took a stance in Germany in the 1930s, saying their loyalty was to Jesus as Lord, not to Hitler and the Nazis; youth in South Africa taking a stand against Apartheid and forming the African National Congress Youth League in 1944 under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, envisioning a world where racial domination would not exist; 250,000 women, men, and children from diverse racial, social, and religious backgrounds gathering in Washington on August 28, 1963, to fight for racial justice.

And these are just a few examples of people of faith engaging in acts of protest. We might add the names of Walter Rauschenbusch and those who fought with him for child labor laws in late nineteenth-century America; Father Hector Gallego who gave his life fighting for the fair treatment of farm workers in Panama in the 1960s, and many in this time who have risked their lives for vulnerable immigrants. We might not immediately connect the familiar Palm Sunday story with these actions, but once we understand its context, we realize that while the day is about many things, one of these is protest — against the Empire and the Emperor, against the ways of abusive power and oppression.

Palm Sunday is a kind of parade, a way of laughing in the face of death. It is an act of protest and defiance against the ways of the world and for the ways of God. And it is a form of proclamation. Jesus tells the world who he is on this day, what kind of messiah, and how far he is willing to go to offer salvation to the world. He does so not through his words but through his actions — choosing to enter town, even knowing the risks; entering in humility and refusing to use force; laying down his life and thus showing that love is the greatest power in the world.

Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah, exposing himself to mocking, spitting, and worse. He lives out the reading from Philippians by not considering equality with God as something to be used to his advantage, but taking the form of a servant and becoming obedient to the point of death. He

has talked about all these things before, but actions speak louder than words. So, today he acts, he offers the most compelling form of proclamation. As his followers, we are called to do the same.

It begins with understanding what it is that we proclaim. It is a message about self-giving service and sacrificial love. It is a message about humility and gentleness. It is a message about who Jesus is and how God uses him to heal individual hearts and a broken world. It is a message about life and love overcoming death and fear, so much so that nothing can stop us from proclaiming the message. Palm Sunday may lead to Good Friday, but Easter Sunday will have the last word, resurrection will have the last word, God will have the last word.

This is the message we are called to proclaim, and this day tells us the most important way we do so is with our actions, not our words. This means arrogance and self-interest have no place in our lives. It means coercion and force have no role in Christian witness. It means judgment and vengeance are cast aside. We proclaim that Christ is Lord by clothing our neighbor and welcoming the stranger, forgiving those who harm us and seeking to understand those who disagree with us, living with hope even in dark times, choosing kindness.

I think of a story a pastoral care professor told in a sermon he preached at the first church I served. While preaching on love, he confessed that when he was starting to pull into a parking place at a mall that week, another car pulled into it before him. He felt his blood pressure and anger rising. He stopped his car, honked his horn, and started to roll down his window or get out of the car to yell at the other driver when he saw an elderly woman get out and start walking toward the mall. At that point, it dawned on him that he was preparing a sermon on love while getting ready to scream at someone over a parking place.

Actions speak louder than words. If we are to proclaim that Christ has made us more kind and loving, we must be more kind and loving. Palm Sunday tells us this. It's a kind of parade through which we laugh in the face of death, an act of protest against the oppressive forces of this world, a form of proclamation through which we show the world who Jesus is and who he has made us. All in all, it's a pretty special day!