

Palm Sunday Parade
Rev. Jamie Butcher

I went to my first protest march when I was in college. It was a rather obscure issue. Some of my friends were interested in advocating for our university's divestment from corporations working in Myanmar. Myanmar, also known as Burma, is a country in Southeast Asia that has one of the world's longest running civil wars. The situation today in Myanmar is dire, and in the early 2000s it wasn't much better. In both seasons, the military government seized power after democratically elected leaders were put under house arrest.

For their protest, my friends meticulously planned a creative approach to advocate for our college's divestment. The event featured heartfelt speeches and home-made signs. The focal point of the protest was a piece of public art constructed by my friends and placed on the public-facing side of the Rotunda. The art added an extra layer of symbolism and impact to our cause. Although the crowd may not have been massive, the protest was effective. My friend kept me posted and I later heard that our provost and Board members had taken action for change.

That initial demonstration during my college days was not my last. There were larger demonstrations, marches where tens of thousands of individuals united, walking through city streets across the globe with a shared purpose. Holding signs high, dressed in solidarity, our voices synchronized as we chanted slogans that had been passed down through the decades.

And I remember the smaller gatherings too. I can still picture the handful of folks standing on the street corner, overshadowed by the Gold Dome, bravely praying and speaking out together, publicly and repeatedly for the change in which they believed.

I know you too can add examples of participation in advocacy work. I've heard some of them and am excited this sermon will stir up more stories. We all know that protests are powerful. Gatherings can be marches, rallies, sit-ins, strikes, boycotts, parades. Anything where the collective comes together to communicate clearly about injustice and to advocate for change in longstanding institutions. In this type of work, the smallest details matter. Everything – from where you stand, to which route you take, to what you wear, to what you say, to the art and promotional material – everything points to the purpose in a protest gathering.

Which brings me to Palm Sunday and the ridiculous looking King.

In his book, “The Binding of the Strong Man” Chet Meyers proposes that the Palm Sunday Parade is a carefully planned demonstration. He likens Jesus' entry into Jerusalem to a “sit in” for Civil Rights or the March on Selma. All parts of the Palm Sunday gathering, he says, point to the message that Jesus brings change. Here are some of those details:

Jesus rides into the city on a colt, a donkey. The animal is not a warhorse. And it cannot pull a chariot at lightning speed. It is not a demonstration of power and force of a mighty monarch. In fact, it is no such thing. The colt is a working animal, and it is a young one, an unriden beast. Choosing for his mount a wild and ordinary animal, Jesus shows his vulnerability. He could get tossed off. He will face suffering, but it won't turn him away. It is a symbolic representation for all to see that his power is not that of a typical King.

Also, Jesus has no army. In Mark's gospel, there may not even be much of a crowd with him. Other gospels speak of the masses of people shouting and waving palms, but in the earliest Gospel we get

this phrase: there were many who gathered around him. And this **many** might not be that much at all. Certainly not legions of marching soldiers flexing their muscles with fight in their blood. Instead, Jesus has his rag-tag group of followers who basically want nothing more than to be helped, to be healed. “Hosanna” they chant which means “Please, Save.”

And what’s more, Jesus’ march proceeds from the northern gate. It’s the Gate of Mercy, which is the area near the Mount of Olives in which there were many graves. Now, the prophets did say the Messiah would come from the Mount of Olives to the Temple Mount, so Jesus fulfills prophecy in this way. But at the same time he enters the city by the graveyard gate, across town, near Herrod’s palace, a parade of Roman authorities and soldiers enter by the royal one. The occupier’s adding force to keep the uprisings at bay during the High and Holy Days. And when Jesus does arrive at the Temple? In Mark’s gospel, he enters the building, looks around, says, “Its late” and leaves for Bethany again. He doesn’t do a thing.

Could it be the pageant of the protest, the pomp of the processional, the details of the parade were the point. Because interestingly, the message of Palm Sunday was not only against the occupying force of Rome. But also, against the expectations of the people who wanted him to be a particular type of King.

You see, hopes for the people’s Messiah were high. Those in Jewish Palestine had been burdened by unjust rulers and mistreated by foreign Kings for centuries. Many prophets said the Messiah would vanquish Israel’s enemies in mighty battles and all would become rich from the spoils of war. The people had hopes that the anointed one would come to unseat the enemy and restore Israel to Jewish rule.

And the people had reason to believe that Jesus would be able to do these very things. By the time he enters Jerusalem, he comes with an impressive resume. He has amassed crowds, thousands of people who would do whatever he said. Jesus had proven his ability to feed miraculously and of course to heal: both things an army would need. He even raised Lazarus from the dead. The people's expectations for the Messiah were high because they had seen all the Jesus could do and his potential to do more too.

So, when Jesus enters the city without ANY of the trappings of a celebratory conquering hero, his message becomes disturbingly clear. Every single detail disrupts expectations to communicate that Jesus is not the typical King, but that he will usher **in a new, and more** difficult thing.

In her powerful sermon, Jessica Rene Patchett puts it this way: On Palm Sunday, Jesus and his disciples demonstrated that Jesus was not exactly the King they'd been waiting for, but he was God's Messiah and he would bring freedom. It's just that Jesus would bring freedom not only to their tribe, but to the whole world.

Patchett moves her consideration of the Palm Sunday parade of Jesus into an invitation for us to march today. The Palm Sunday parade continues, she says, and calls out to any who want to join Jesus the Christ on a long walk to freedom.

I can't tell you why you might be inclined to join the Palm Sunday parade today, but I can tell you why I will.

I join the Palm Sunday parade, she says, because I don't think anyone but God has figured out how to lead us out of the social-political mess we're in.

I join the Palm Sunday parade because we live in a nation still plagued by the sin of racism and the delusion of white supremacy. I don't buy into the myths that people of one race are smarter or better equipped to lead or govern. I want to follow Jesus into a future where people of all races and religions are free and equal.

I join the Palm Sunday parade because we live in a culture obsessed with violence and our children are dying. And I don't think that the people with weapons lined up to march into halls of power are the ones who can save our children. But I think that following the Prince of Peace, we can.

I join the Palm Sunday parade because I've watched generations before me join it and follow Jesus to freedom, and I want to get there too.

Friends, the Palm Sunday parade began a long, long time ago, but it marches out today. Across the world this morning, millions join its number to walk beside the prince of peace.

And you are invited to come and join it too, singing SAVE. Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest.
Glory be to God Time without End. Amen.