

“The Way Out Is Through”

Luke 19: 28-40

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When it comes to worship styles and the way we do things, compared to Christian churches all around the world, on a the spectrum of “high church” and “low church” we fall much closer to the “low church” side of the spectrum. High church and low church does not mean good church and bad church or right church and wrong church. It's just church jargon that describes the style of worship that regularly takes place.

High church simply means that much of the worship liturgy is prayers that are memorized because they are the same words spoken week after week. The order of worship is always the same and there is ritual and pomp at every point. Lots of smells and bells. Going to worship services that are considered “high church” always makes me feel a bit fancier than usual, but also a bit more formal, a bit stiffer. I understand the appeal of these because there is a familiarity to the liturgy and you know what to expect each week.

In a “low church” you can't always count on what to expect because it changes depending on the occasion. The words are more casual, almost conversational, and it can feel more like you're gathered in someone's living room than in a grand Cathedral. It can feel intimate and welcoming, but also disorienting at times because you might wonder if there are moments when we are making up the words as we go along. “Low churches” have ritual but it is more occasional ritual than a set ritual that defines every moment.

South Church is definitely more towards the “low church” end of the spectrum, and I think those of us that return here Sunday after Sunday quite like that. You can tell we're more of a “low church” place because the ministers sneak in the side door a minute or two before worship

begins rather than processing down the aisles during the opening music. You can tell South Church's forbearers didn't even think about processions and pomp because we have TWO aisles and we never know which one is for coming and which one is for going. But we're low church, so maybe it doesn't even matter.

The joy of having things like prayers and rituals that are familiar is that there is a rhythm. It becomes second nature and you can relax into the words or the movement or the tradition. You know the words or the actions of the worship so well that they are a part of you and you don't have to think about how to do them. The downside in having things that are so familiar is that in the familiarity of the rhythm and the words, we risk losing some of the meaning. Or it becomes so familiar that we stop hearing what is really being said. Each style has its pros and cons, which is why there is no one right way to worship, and why even though we tend to end up more on one side of the spectrum, we aim for elements of both styles and we can fully appreciate worship that feels different from ours.

This season, especially Holy Week, is the closest we get to high church worship around here. When you attend our Maundy Thursday service you know exactly what to expect each year because the service is the same – and it is that familiar ritual of reading the Passion story and extinguishing the candles that draws us in. We crave the drama and the ritual, and it because of the familiarity that it has become a beloved, favorite service for many of the people who participate in it. On Easter Sunday we know that our liturgy will be overflowing with Alleluias and that the story will be one of an empty tomb and resurrection. It is full of pomp and circumstance and the biggest question – the only variable from year to year – is will we or won't we sing the Hallelujah Chorus? There are years we don't and that's okay, the break in rhythm becomes just as expected as the brass bellowing from the choir loft.

Palm Sunday kicks off all this pomp with one of the only formal processions we do each year. The procession of palms is something I have been doing since I was a child – not just

at this church but at every church I have ever attended. It is familiar. I know how to wave a palm in the air and say, “Hosanna! Hosanna!” Many of us look forward to the palm processional and especially to the palm origami that happens during worship as we try to remember how to fold our palms into the shapes of crosses or any other shape we can manage.

I love the ritual of Palm Sunday, but it is so familiar that I also worry that in the midst of acting out the drama, we lose some of the complex meaning behind it. I worry that we anticipate the joy of the palms so much that we are at risk of confusing Jesus' procession for a parade when that was not what it was intended to be. In fact, according to scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in their book “The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem” on that first Palm Sunday there was actually a big parade that took place, but it was on the opposite side of the city from where Jesus was.

Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, came into town and a parade was thrown in his honor with calvary and soldiers and drums and shouts of joy. Jesus' procession, far away from the large crowds, was a carefully timed counter-procession otherwise known as a protest. Even today, in our culture, just as it was in Jesus' time, we love parades, but we have mixed feelings about protests.

When there is a parade, the streets are shut down and the city is disrupted but we don't mind because we are invited to join in. We bring the whole the family. We take pictures as the parade marchers go by – if we can't be there we watch it broadcast on tv and point out our favorite floats and our favorite marching bands. We love parades. We have a great tradition of them in our country and whether it's the Macy's Day parade or a St. Patrick's Day parade or a sports team victory parade – we understand parades.

But Jesus' procession into Jerusalem was not a parade. It was a protest. When there is a protest, the streets are shut down and the city is disrupted and we mind because we weren't told about it beforehand. We keep our kids at home, away from the danger. We wonder aloud that

there has to be a better way to get their point across, a way that doesn't interfere with traffic or our lives or doesn't demand attention such a bold way. We have a great tradition of protests in our country and whether it's the Boston Tea Party or the Abolition Movement or the Civil Rights Movement or Black Live's Matter, as a whole we have a hard time getting behind protests until years later when we see it written down in history books. By then it is so familiar that we only think of the positive things that came out of it, not the disruption and discord and disobedience of the protests involved.

When we process with our Palms on this Sunday, we are actually reenacting a protest. I think that is part of what we often lose in our anticipation of the familiar story and the ritual of waving the palms. A colleague of mine, Jim, wanted to remind his congregation that Palm Sunday is intertwined with a long tradition of protests so when their church school children march down the aisle with palms this morning, their palms will be layered on top of protest signs. Their church school has spent the last few weeks studying protests and civil disobedience and last week their kids made their own protest signs that say things like “Stop Bullying” and “Be Nice To Each Other” and “End War Now, Please.” I love the politeness of their demands. It is the signs that they kids made that they will be carrying down the aisle, woven together with the traditional palms. They have kept the familiar ritual and the pomp that we all love, but they are reclaiming the connection to protests and speaking out against authority.

The disciples and followers who gathered on the side of the road as Jesus came into town would not have been your typical citizens. They were the outcasts and misfits who were looking for hope. They had witnessed or heard of Jesus' miracles and in him they recognized the promise of a different future – one that was defined by peace and not oppression. They were people who stopped counting on government officials to provide for them or look out for them. They needed something different to believe in. They were so hungry for this new kind of hope that they risked offense by joining in the protest. They left their neighbors at the big parade and they walked

across the city to join the renegade, vagabond group of disciples to participate in the protest, led by Jesus, on a colt that he had asked to be stolen for him.

That's right. When Jesus said to his disciples, "Go into the village and look around until you find a tied up colt – you know there will be a few to choose from because we haven't invented cars yet so this is our only means of transportation. Grab one that hasn't been ridden before and if anyone asks you why you are *taking their colt*, just tell them the Lord needs it. And then run." That is stealing. I like to imagine that those two disciples laid their cloaks on the colt not to make a saddle for Jesus, but to disguise the animal in case its owners came looking for it.

So Palm Sunday is really a protest that begins with breaking the law. It is one of the most easily forgotten and most important parts of this day. It is something that still feels incredibly relevant to our lives today. We are still a people looking for hope every chance we get and seeking peace in the face of oppression and violence. Palm Sunday is our timely reminder that in this hotly contested election season we should not be looking to our presidential candidates to be the people who will solve our nation's problems and bring peace to our land, but that we should be looking to the people who are engaging in civil disobedience and organizing counter-movements to create a new vision for how we might live together and how we might enact justice for all people. I know it's not a popular way of looking at the world – it wasn't in Jesus' time either. On Palm Sunday we are faced with the choice of going to the parade for Pontius Pilate, or for walking across the city and laying down our cloaks for Jesus, even as he upsets the authorities, even as he risks his life to proclaim his message of justice and peace and hope and love without limits.

This is the start of Holy Week – a week that moves us from the solitude and wilderness to disruption, betrayal, and resurrection. There is nothing ordinary about this week. It is meant to shake us up, to unsettle us, to even disturb us with its pain and injustice. My hope for each of us as we enter into this Holy Week is that even as we embrace and fall into the rhythm of our

worship services and our vigils and our Easter pomp, we will do so with open eyes and ears perked up, listening for the story to prick our hearts in new ways. Reclaim the original meaning behind this day and this whole week – a time meant to shake us out of our comfort zones and into the streets with the protestors. A time when we are meant to risk everything – our decency, our safety, and even our lives as we know them – to journey with Jesus in his final days, to eat with him at his last meal, to stand up for him at his trial and stand beside him at the cross.

On that first Palm Sunday, when the protest was over, the people who participated had a choice before them, just as we have the same choice today: do they go home and return to what is familiar and comfortable, pleased with their participation and in the protest, or will they continue to follow Jesus, not knowing precisely to expect or what will happen, but trusting in him enough to take the risk and to go on the journey through his last days, knowing that doing so has the power and the potential to change their lives forever? Palm Sunday is the turning point in our journey with Jesus, the moment when we can turn back and return home to safety, or when we can lay down our cloaks in the street, knowing that to truly be free from injustice and suffering, the only way out is through.