

Making an Entrance

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
Matthew 21:1-11

Crossroads Christian Church
April 13, 2014 Palm Sunday A

Back in the days when I was involved in community theatre, I learned how important it was to make an entrance in character. Even without a word of dialogue, you can communicate important things about your character as you enter. A villain skulks or struts. A heroine glides gracefully. A comical character will walk in goofily or run in and trip and fall just to bring a laugh. And making the entrance not only says something about the character, but it advances the story. It helps the audience know whether to relax and enjoy or to be tense with anticipation. So making an entrance is important.

It's true in real life as well as on the stage. When you go for a job interview, you want to make a good first impression—eager, but not too eager, friendly but not ingratiating, sharp but not arrogant.

Today on Palm Sunday we celebrate Jesus making an entrance. Jesus and the disciples knew perfectly well that this wasn't just another stroll into town to go visit the market, or even to go worship at the Temple. There was all the anticipation and excitement of the holiday, with vast numbers of people pouring into town to celebrate. There was the tension that existed with the Roman occupation, with squadrons of soldiers there to suppress any possible uprising or incident. And there was, most of all, the anticipation of what would happen when Jesus came to town on this particular Passover.

The popularity and power of Jesus was great enough that it sent a cold chill up the backs of the Romans and the city leaders. They were already setting up contingency plans. How do we get this troublemaker out of the way with the least possible fuss?

Jesus came into town knowing what to expect. He knew that many people saw him as having the potential to lead a revolution, to spark a rebellion, and that they might take matters into their own hands. He knew of the opposition of the political and religious leaders. For good or for bad, he would be

a focus of attention. The other gospels show us that Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem was carefully planned and orchestrated. It didn't just happen. Jesus wanted people to know just who he was and what he was doing. He was the Messiah. He had come to save the people. But he wasn't going to save them by leading a rebellion. He was coming as the Prince of Peace. He rode a donkey. The custom was that a conquering king would enter a city on a warhorse. A king who came in peace would ride on a donkey. "Hosanna!" the crowds cried, as they waved their palm branches in tribute. It was a cry one would make to God. It meant "O save us!" They shouted "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" That phrase came from Psalm 118:26, and had been used in festival processions of kings and princes and priests—it was at once a political and a theological claim about Jesus. So much enthusiasm! So much hope! So many expectations! And so Jesus came, the center of attention, into the city which would later capture him, torture him, kill him, and cast him aside—but also the city which would witness his glorious resurrection. So he made his entrance, and said just what he needed to say. I am not a conquering hero like David, I am a Prince of Peace. I didn't come to save you *from* the Romans, I have come to save you *for* God.

David Ewart notes that around the time of the Passover, that the Romans would also make triumphal entries into Jerusalem, to ensure order. He puts it this way: "Now Jerusalem is not a large city. And what the authors of the Bible take for granted and fail to mention is that while Jesus is parading in on a donkey through one of the back gates, on the other side of the city Pilate is parading in on a war horse accompanied by a squadron or two of battle-hardened Roman soldiers." (unquote)ⁱ Whether it happened at the same time or not, we don't know. But isn't the contrast wonderful? A prince of war in one gate, a prince of peace in another.

In the story of the triumphal entry, we have hints of the cross. The story begins at the Mount of Olives. On Thursday night, that is where Jesus and the disciples will go after the Passover supper to pray, and there he will be arrested. Crowds will cry Hosanna, save us! And later, on Friday, crowds will cry

crucify him! Different crowds, different people, perhaps, but still how quickly we go from acceptance to rejection. There's another irony, though. Jesus comes in as the Prince of Peace, but immediately he begins to stir up trouble, turning the tables on the money changers in the temple; harshly criticizing the religious leaders. Cries of praise will become cries of rage. His journey into the gates of the city will lead to another journey to outside the gates of the city—to the place of execution. The triumph will lead to tragedy, but the tragedy will lead to the ultimate triumph, the open tomb. Jesus made quite an entrance.

Thom Shuman wraps up this combination of triumph and tragedy in his prayer poem "Will I?"

will i lay my cloak
before you,
when they arrest you on olive mountain,
or pull it tighter around me
fading into the ranks of the deserters;

will i shout:
'Blessed is the one who comes
in the name of the Lord!'
when they parade you before the authorities,
or will i tell any one -
and every one -
around me
that i never met you in my life;

will i lay my palm branches
at your feet,
as they march you
to Calvary,
or use them to put more stripes on your bloody back;

will i run behind you
when they carry you
to the tomb,
or turn away
as the ashes of my hopes

are rubbed into my shattered heart?ⁱⁱ
(unquote)
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It's a disturbing question, isn't it? Will I? Will I remain faithful in tough times as well as good, or will I deny or betray Jesus? Will I only follow Jesus if he meets my expectations and my needs?

Most of the people who stood waving their palm fronds and shouting Hosanna and "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" were blissfully unaware of what would happen in the terrible, awful, and yet awesome week to come. For many, it was a protest movement, a demonstration, a challenge to the Romans and the high priests that they were willing to switch allegiances to a new king.

But some, the disciples, had heard the words, words they had wanted to ignore, words that Jesus had repeated to them over and over again in hopes that they would finally sink in; that Jesus would suffer and be executed before he could rise in power. The hopes of those who anticipated a glorious revolution would be dashed. The hearts of those who loved Jesus dearly would be broken.

We see the story of Palm Sunday from hindsight; from the perspective of people who knew what happened later in the week, at the temple, the courtyard, the upper room, the governor's palace, the hill of crucifixion, and the empty tomb. But still we pick up the palm fronds. Still we praise that humble man on a donkey. Still we cry Hosanna—O, save us! And still we remember that he rides and makes an entrance into Jerusalem to face death, so that we might know life. Amen.

ⁱ David Ewart, holytextures.com

ⁱⁱ Thom Schuman, lectionaryliturgies.blogspot.com