

# If Only

Luke 19:28-44

Farmville Baptist Church

April 10, 2022

Have you ever been in a parade? I've been in a bunch. I was in marching bands from sixth grade on through college, and parades are the bread and butter of marching bands. I've been in a Mardi Gras parade, three St. Patrick's Day parades in Savannah, a governor's inaugural parade, the DC Cherry Blossom Parade, and more Christmas parades than I can count. And do you know what? Parades are fun, festive, and exciting! It doesn't matter if you've seen the parade before, or if you're in the parade and your legs are tired around mile 8 – you hear the cheer of the crowd, enjoy the explosion of colors from the floats, wave at the participants, and just generally have a good time.

On their face, all parades are pretty much the same: a procession of entertainment and community organizations passing through a crowded area of town, often right down Main Street. But parades actually serve a few different, if related, purposes. The Cherry Blossom Parade, for instance, or the St. Patrick's Day parade in Savannah, are annual celebrations of some unique local custom, instilling local pride and raising business revenue at the same time.

Christmas parades offer a venue to showcase local talent and organizations with a festive air. An inaugural parade, by contrast, is the very definition of a victory parade, a way of celebrating a win, often with plum roles in the parade going to a victor's biggest donors or supporters.

It is this last sort of parade that is the most ancient. For centuries, millennia, even, parades were part of the pageantry that came with victory, either in politics, warfare,

or both. Defeated armies were paraded through the capital cities of their winning opponents, often before being sent into slavery or killed in mass executions. Conquered cities often watched silently as victorious troops filed into the area to begin an often-brutal occupation. Rome's famous triumphal arches were markers of victory parades for successful generals, who often became key political players or even emperors as a result of the <sup>showcasing</sup> ~~display~~ of their martial success. Parades in the ancient world were displays of power, and every piece of the spectacle – from the brandishing of weapons to the display of defeated soldiers to the exhibition of exotic animals to the sounds of marching bands and minstrels – was consciously included to elevate the status of the parade's patron or honoree, as well as communicate a message to the watching crowds: this person

or this empire is in charge, and there's no other possible way to live than under their rule and reign.

A parade just like that was taking place on what we think of as Palm Sunday. It isn't described in our Scripture passage, of course; in fact, it took place on the other side of the city. New Testament scholars John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg paint a picture of this other parade in their book looking at Jesus' last week before his crucifixion. They describe the standard practice of the Roman troops occupying Judea: the resident governor, in this case Pilate, would bring a few units of Roman soldiers into Jerusalem the week before Passover to maintain order and squash any revolutionary ideas during the great historical independence festival of the Jewish year. Complete with golden imperial standards, horses and chariots, gleaming armor, and bright, sharp swords, the Roman procession from the west would

impress upon the Jerusalem populace just who was in charge – and hopefully tamp down any stirrings of insurrection during a celebration of God’s liberation.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, that parade is not the one we remember and celebrate on this Palm Sunday. It was filled with powerful displays and a military purpose, but it was nothing special. Yet at almost the same time, on the eastern side of the city, another parade was taking place. This other parade wasn’t marked by the tramp of soldiers’ feet and the clang of armor, the whinny of chariot-horses and the glint of gold on imperial standards. Instead, there was the swish of palm branches and the pitter-patter of one solitary donkey underneath the cries of “hosanna” and “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” And at the center of it was not a Roman governor come to town to keep the peace at the

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, p. 1-5

point of a sword, but a simple Galilean rabbi proclaiming a very different kind of peace.

We don't know what the mood was like on the other side of the city – probably a relatively quiet and sober crowd, given the implicit threat of the Roman troops and the governor riding at their head – but the atmosphere on the eastern side of the city for Jesus' parade was, in a word, raucous. There was no red carpet, but there was the next best thing: a covering of cloaks for the road. Praise songs from Israel's past, some with revolutionary lyrics, were being lifted with gusto. There was a joy in the air that was almost palpable, almost touchable. What were they joyful about? We don't fully know – we don't know what they expected Jesus to do, how they expected their lives to change, or any of that. We just know that they were excited, happy, and

hopeful. And we rejoice with them, because they were celebrating their king and ours, Jesus.

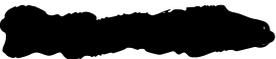
Yet not everyone in the crowd that day was joyful.

Where we look at the scene and recognize the joy and the hope for a peaceful future that is less an armed truce and more true wholeness and trust that negates the need for violence and force, the Pharisees in the crowd saw something else. They saw a powder keg. And whatever their own personal views towards the Roman occupation – and most Pharisees were not fans, wanting Galilee and Judea freed from the heavy boot of Roman oppression – they didn't want any trouble, either. They didn't want some peasant in the crowd to get the wrong idea from Jesus' parade and lead a bunch of others to attack the Roman governor. They didn't want some sermon of Jesus in the streets to get overheard and misconstrued to the Roman authorities. They didn't

want what actually happened after our passage today, where Jesus himself went to the Temple to challenge the status quo in a pretty memorable manner. They didn't want to risk a confrontation, so they told Jesus, "Hey! Keep your people quiet!"

The Pharisees, we have to understand, were not the black-hatted villains we often ~~make them~~ out to be. They were actually pretty similar to Jesus in a lot of their view of God and what God was doing in the world. They were not, most of them, connected to the centralized worship in Jerusalem, the religious establishment of the day that was so complicit in Roman control and oppression. The Pharisees were doing the same sorts of things Jesus was doing: working out in the villages and towns, teaching the Scriptures, helping those in need. They didn't always agree with Jesus on his interpretations of the Torah, and they

didn't always have the same set of priorities he had – but they weren't all that different. They wanted to see God's reign come, God's people freed, and justice prevail, just like Jesus did. They wanted to see God's salvation arrive. They believed in the resurrection of the dead and the future of God's kingdom come.

And yet, as God's kingdom literally is arriving in something close to fullness, as the Messiah enters Jerusalem to challenge the powers of the world, the Pharisees tell him to shut up and  get his followers to shut up, *too*.

You see, the Pharisees talk a big game. They want peace, God's kind of peace. They want restoration of Israel at its best. They want faithfulness to take root in the communities around them and God's people to step up in their calling as God's ambassadors to the world. They want many of the same things Jesus wanted, the same things his disciples

wanted, the same things we want. Yet, at the pivotal moment, they balked. They didn't want to risk the quasi-peace they had. They didn't want Jesus and his followers to follow through on his rhetoric. And partly its because they didn't fully "get" him, and weren't fully on board with what he was preaching. But, I think, a bigger part was because they were scared to risk for the true peace of God.

And, in truth, I get it. Like the Pharisees, I'm a pretty moderate, middle-of-the-road kind of guy. I get nervous when the time comes to make a leap of faith. I get a little squeamish when it's time to make a decision and take a risk. I get a little fearful when stepping out into the unknown, with potential negative consequences if it all falls through. And, to be honest, I sometimes don't really want the peace Jesus offers – because I don't really understand it. It isn't the mutually-assured-destruction model we're so used to in

the world, where we keep bridges unburned and conflict at arms' length because we ~~know~~<sup>think</sup> it protect us as well as the other person or party. It's a state of uneasy truce we live in most of the time with those around us, keeping certain topics off-limits or certain opinions to ourselves, refusing to acknowledge reality at times and putting on a fake smile and a good front when with others or when asked how things are going because we want to keep ~~things~~<sup>everyone</sup> calm and collected. In the words of the Roman historian Tacitus, we "make a desolation and call it peace" – a desolation of truth, of authenticity, of healing. We paper over our divisions and our hurts and act like everything is alright.

Jesus rightly refuses the Pharisees' request – because he knows the desolation they call peace is not true peace, and the quiet they desire from his followers is unattainable, because God's kingdom was going to burst into our world

whether they wanted it to or not, even if God had to empower the stones to shout to do it. “I tell you if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” The time had come, Jesus is telling the Pharisees. They can’t avoid it any more. The showdown was happening between God’s way and the way of the world, and there were going to be fireworks. It was time to take the plunge.

That doesn’t mean Jesus was unaware of the pain that it was going to cause, not just to himself, but to the people around him – his followers, the Pharisees, the residents of Jerusalem. Our passage today ends with Jesus’ foresight of

what lay in store for Jerusalem – death and destruction at the hands of an army. <sup>And</sup> ~~And~~ it brought Jesus <sup>nothing but sorrow.</sup> ~~nothing but sorrow.~~ Even as his followers are dancing about and singing and celebrating, we’re told that as he caught sight of Jerusalem, he wept. He

knew what would come if they kept going down the path, and it broke his heart.

But he also knew that it was the result of the choices that had been made and that people just like the Pharisees were making that day, not exactly choosing Pilate's parade but also not wanting <sup>to risk what Jesus</sup> ~~to risk what Jesus~~ was bringing to town. "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace," he lamented. True peace – what the Bible calls *shalom* – is not a quiet peace, a tense peace, or a peace <sup>maintained</sup> ~~maintained~~ under the threat of violence or division. Peace, instead, is wholeness: wholeness within people and wholeness between people. It doesn't mean a false or enforced uniformity – the peace of the status quo, where disagreements are squashed and divisions are ignored and problems are never dealt with and evil or injustice is tolerated. It instead means people being real, true, authentic

with one another – admitting their failings, empathizing with the other person, finding points of agreement, and, above all, consciously returning, over and over again, to love for one another. That sort of love, as Paul would say a few years later, covers a multitude of sins – but not in a coverup sort of way. It covers them with an unbreakable bond of peace, that works through pain and loss, anger and division, and heals the rifts between us. That’s the peace of God. That’s the peace of Jesus. That’s the peace that Jerusalem could have had.

If only. If only the people of Jerusalem had recognized what God was doing in their midst. If only the Pharisees and others like them, like us, good people who wanted God’s will to triumph, had understood the need for taking the risk, stepping forward in faith that God was at work and saying, “I know it is nerve-wracking, scary even, to be this vulnerable

and commit to God's form of peace – but we choose to cry out in joy at God's better way. We reject the peace of Pilate, embodied in that other parade of wary peace under threat, and instead choose the singing, palm-waving form of peace embodied by a simple rabbi preaching love, riding a donkey instead of a warhorse.” Had the Pharisees (and the rest of Jerusalem) chosen that path, would the cross have been necessary? And would the city of Jerusalem itself <sup>have</sup> been savagely decimated a few decades later?

Those are questions we can never answer, because, as Jesus said, Jerusalem did not choose what would bring peace, true, Godly peace. It led him to weep over Jerusalem. But unlike the Pharisees that day, unlike the people of Jerusalem, we still have the choice. Will we choose the uneasy peace of a world at constant threat towards one another? Will we choose to maintain frosty yet polite

relations with one another by holding back and hiding our true self? Will we keep silent at the joy in our hearts, or even push that joy aside, in the name of protecting ourselves and taking no risks for God?

Or will we, like those disciples in the throng, lift our voices in praise of the peace of God made available to us through Jesus Christ? Will we lay our cloaks, our all, before him, following his donkey of peace in blatant and vulnerable counter-witness to the threats of the powers-that-be – even the powers of death and hell themselves? Will we base our lives – our conversations, our relationships, our choices and our actions – not on the hoarding and protective tendencies of the fearful human heart, but instead on the open and giving and sacrificial love of the heart of God himself? It might cost us – like it cost Jesus in grief and despair and loss and pain – but it is a better life than that promised by a

world far from God. If only we make that choice, we can find a peace beyond the world's peace – one that doesn't solve every earthly pain and trouble, but that can sustain us in their midst. We can live a life of joy no matter what comes, filled with the peace or shalom of God, if only we join this *other* parade.