

***First and Center***  
**Center Church, Hartford**  
**Pastor's Blog**  
**April 9, 2019**



Palm Sunday is coming up this week, and I am thinking about parades. That's what many church folk call what they do with palms in many places: a "Palm Parade." Often in religious art, both good and tacky, the Palm Sunday scene is shown as joyful throngs with a smiling Jesus waving from his donkey as though he were Ferris Bueller on that infamous float. Lots of people come to Palm Sunday services expecting the tone to be joyful, victorious even, a prelude to Easter.

It was a prelude to Easter, but not in the way it is often portrayed. At Center Church, we have a palm procession at the end of the service. The bulk of the service, however, reminds us of the actual prelude to Easter. This was not the typical parade.

Jesus knew he was riding to his death. He had told the disciples this, and in the midst of the crowds, they thought surely Jesus had misjudged the situation. He hadn't. We see the religious leaders on the sidelines, upset at his entry, telling him to shut his followers' mouths, and plotting to kill him.

Jerusalem had parades. There were religious processions on holy days. More common, however, were the Roman military parades. Like the parades in North Korea that our President so admired, the Roman parades showed off the military might of the empire. Lots of soldiers and their swords, commanders on beautiful steeds, loud boots stomping the dirt and stone streets of old Jerusalem, chariots, occasionally political officials carried in their litters.

Jesus orchestrated his parade to be rather different. He rode no fine steed or chariot. No strong slaves carried him in a litter. He must have looked a bit amusing on a small donkey, slowly ambling into the city (Have you ever ridden a donkey? Not fast). Though we use palms, most of the stories talk about his disciples putting their cloaks down on the road, something often done to keep the dust down for powerful riders. Palms probably did the same duty. And the crowd of those praising him would most certainly have been smaller than usually depicted: his disciples and

maybe 20-30 other followers, along with the folk in Jerusalem who had been alerted to his coming. They made just enough noise to draw attention to this sorry spectacle and get people to come closer to check it out.

As we finish our service on Sunday and prepare to walk around the block with our palms, we will also carry a large palm-covered cross. The last hymn in the service prepares us: "Ride on, ride on in majesty, in lowly pomp ride on to die," are the original words; the revised version in our hymnal has a second verse which echoes this: "Ride on, ride on in majesty! As crowds of people come to see, and shout hosannas, lifting high their praise for one about to die."

Remember, on Palm Sunday, it's not about the kind of triumphal power that secular rulers seek and abuse. Jesus brought a kind of power they could not understand and were threatened by: the power of extravagant love and expansive inclusion. The rulers of state and religious institutions knew in their guts that this power was stronger than theirs by far. They thought they could kill it.

They were wrong.

~ The Rev. Shelly Stackhouse,  
Transitional Minister