

SERMON TEXT: John 12:12-19

SERMON TITLE: “Two Processions”

In a book called *The Last Week: A Day-by Day Account of Jesus’s Final Week in Jerusalem*, two biblical scholars help us to imagine the day that Jesus entered Jerusalem:

Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year.

Arriving from Caesarea-on-the Sea and entering the city from the west was Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea and Samaria. His procession was a spectacular display of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Pilate and his troops were on a mission to reinforce the Roman garrison in the Fortress Antonia overlooking the Jewish Temple and its grounds. This was a common practice for the Romans at the beginning of major Jewish Festivals because the Romans were always concerned about uprisings and with the great crowds gathering in Jerusalem to remember the Passover liberation of the Jewish people from an earlier oppressive empire; Pilate wanted boots on the ground. His show of force was not only a reminder to the Jews of Rome’s military dominance; but also a statement about the superiority of Rome’s religion. The Roman emperor, you see, was not simply the powerful ruler of the empire; he was proclaimed “Son of God”—a descendant of the god Apollo. He was known as “Lord,” “Savior,” and the one who had brought “peace on earth.”

At the same time, from the east came a procession of a different kind led by a peasant from Nazareth named Jesus. Absent were the trappings of imperial power. Instead, Jesus rode a donkey, stirring up memories of the words once spoken by the prophet Zecariah: *Tell the daughter of Zion, look, your king is coming, humble and mounted on a donkey. He will cut off*

the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem...and he shall command peace to the nations.

The crowd that gathered to greet him that day carried palm branches and they shouted: *Hosanna!* [which means, “save now”] *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the king of Israel.* They would also come to call him “King of Kings,” “Lord of Lords,” the Son of God,” the “Prince of Peace,” “the Savior of the World.” (Borg, Marcus J. and Crossan, John Dominic. *The Last Week: The Day-by-Day Account of Jesus’s Final Week in Jerusalem.* San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2006.)

So there we have it: Two processions—two perspectives on reality—two representatives of rival kingdoms—one representing Caesar and a whole system built upon domination, control and violence—another representing an alternative vision that results from God’s rule on earth—and both entering Jerusalem and moving inexorably toward a confrontation that ultimately infuses this tired old world with the energy of new life found in Jesus Christ.

So the question arises: Which procession are we in? Speaking personally, I see myself in the crowd surrounding Jesus; but I’m on the fringe of the crowd. I want him to rule in my life but only up to a point. I want him to rule in my life; but only in ways that I’m comfortable with. I don’t want to do anything too radical or too risky. I don’t want to do anything that might lower my standard of living or bring to me ridicule or rejection. And I certainly don’t want to do anything that might bring me a cross to bear. I want to avoid Good Fridays! I want to stay comfortable and safe.

But here’s the rub: If King Jesus is to rule in my life completely, how can I set such boundaries? For to follow him is to move beyond the boundaries and into a fullness of life lived on God’s terms—not Caesar’s. And I want this kind of life for myself, but then I don’t want it. I

don't want it enough to change what needs to be changed so that Christ rules completely in every aspect of my life from how I use my money to how I use my time.

And to the extent that I resist the rule of Christ in my life, I bow to Caesar. Now please understand that I'm not talking here about a literal Roman Caesar. I'm using the image as a metaphor for the social, political, economic and cultural system in which we all live as 21st century Americans—a system that exerts a profound influence upon our lives. It's a system that shapes how we view the world, our nation, our race, our possessions, our neighbors, our enemies. It teaches us what to value and whom to value; what to fear and whom to fear; what to accept and what to reject. It even teaches us whom we're allowed to kill.

So in this way, Caesar is still in power. And Caesar still has a hold on me—but only with my consent. I am, in many ways, a beneficiary of the system. I enjoy the comforts provided by the system. I enjoy the security provided by Caesar. To borrow a phrase from Paul, in so many ways I am conformed to the standards of this world—and in that conformity, I bow before Caesar.

And this does make me uncomfortable because I've been around the Jesus-procession long enough to know that Caesar is not God. Caesar pretends to be God; Caesar tries to act like God; Caesar demands to be worshipped like God; but Caesar is not God. Caesar can do many things—some of them good—but Caesar is not God. Jesus Christ is Lord! The question is: Am I uncomfortable enough to embrace fully the reign of Christ in my life—so that I come to love like him—to live like him—to give like him? The best I can say this morning is that I'm in crowd with the Jesus-procession—even if I'm still on the fringe.

The power of Palm Sunday for me is that I can join the crowd in crying out for salvation to come now. I can proclaim Jesus as King and renew my commitment to break free from Caesar's grasp so that I might live fully in the kingdom of God.

So let me ask you: In which procession are you?