

Tracy Daub
4/10/22—University Presbyterian Church
Luke 19:28-40

THE 3 “P’s” OF PALM SUNDAY

Does Palm Sunday puzzle any one? It’s a celebratory day in the life of the church. We wave our palm branches. We sing uplifting songs. But what *exactly* are we celebrating? We have a general idea of the story—how Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey or a colt, depending on which gospel you read. But why is that something to celebrate? This seems especially strange when we consider what awaits Jesus in Jerusalem: his arrest and his brutal execution. So Palm Sunday leaves us a bit confused. It’s ostensibly a celebratory event, but a celebration we aren’t always clear about. And yet it is also an event tinged with foreboding. And so Palm Sunday puzzles us.

It might help us to consider this as a day with layers of meaning. Consider Palm Sunday as a day of 3 “P’s.” Palm Sunday is a *parade*. Palm Sunday is a *protest*. And Palm Sunday is a *procession*, a funeral procession to be precise. Parade, protest, funeral procession.

Let’s start with the *parade* since that seems to be the most obvious. Jesus’ ride into Jerusalem certainly resembles a parade. Parades are celebratory events, and this one is no exception. The gospel writer of Luke tells us that people were greeting Jesus as he rode into town by spreading their cloaks on the road before him—sort of like giving him the “red carpet” treatment. Luke tells us that the disciples accompanied Jesus, giving praises to God with loud voices. And what exactly were they praising God about? Luke tells us they were praising God, “for all the deeds of power” they had witnessed in Jesus’ ministry. No doubt you remember some of those deeds of power—how Jesus healed the sick and the disabled, how he taught the people about God’s love with compelling words of wisdom, how he raised the dead to life, how

he included outcasts and sinners and women and children in the circle of acceptance, how he calmed the stormy sea and fed the thousands with the most meager of resources, and how he forgave people their sins. These are some of the deeds of power the disciples had witnessed. And they knew that this man Jesus was from God.

So on that first Palm Sunday, the disciples celebrated Jesus' arrival into Jerusalem by proclaiming, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." Did you hear what they said? Blessed is the *king*. The king. A king, after all, is someone with power. That is what the disciples and others were celebrating that first Palm Sunday: the arrival of God's king. And what a blessed, blessed relief that had to have been for them. What a blessed joy that had to be to those bearing the weight and cruelty and oppression of Rome's power upon their lives, and the power of poverty, and the power of death and disease, and the power of greed and exploitation. Here was God's king coming into their lives with a welcome, blessed power.

This is the same thing we celebrate this Palm Sunday all these thousands of years later. We all need a new kind of king in our lives—but instead of the term "king" which carries patriarchal connotations, let's instead use the term "sovereign ruler." What a blessed joy it is, what a blessed relief it is to our broken world to know that a new sovereign comes into our lives with power. Think about the joy the Ukrainian people would have to see the arrival of a new power that would save them. Think about our joy at the arrival of God's Sovereign One of power when we are weighed down by all we read in the papers, by all we see on TV, by all the sorrow and suffering and cruelty and exploitation that goes on in our lives and world.

The Sovereign One we celebrate this Palm Sunday enters our world and lives with a radically new and fresh and needed kind of power. This kind of Sovereign One loves us unconditionally. This Sovereign One is filled with mercy. This Sovereign One is the upholder

of justice, proclaimer of truth, friend of the friendless, champion of the outcast, creator of beauty. This is what we celebrate on Palm Sunday! We celebrate the arrival of God's radically different, much needed power in our lives and world. What a blessed relief to know that the powers of darkness and suffering and wrong are not left unchallenged by the God of love. Thank God for the arrival of this Sovereign One!

But all this talk about the coming of the king made the religious leaders very, very nervous. And for good reason. Rome was known for being extremely brutal and ruthless to any form of opposition. All this talk about the coming of a new king could very easily unleash Roman aggression. So the religious rulers say to the disciples, "Shut up! Our lives are at stake!" But Jesus won't silence them. Because this parade, you see, is also a protest march. And the truth must be proclaimed. Lives are indeed at stake and that is why Jesus won't silence his disciples. Jesus cares too much about your life and my life to remain silent in the face of the powers of darkness. Lives are indeed at stake. This is a protest march about power, about confronting the powers of brutality and wrong with the power of God's love and justice. And so Palm Sunday is also a protest march.

Some of us are familiar with protest marches. Maybe you've marched for black lives or brown lives, for incarcerated lives or refugee lives, for women's lives or LGBTQ lives. Some of us are acquainted with making our protests public and marching to confront the powers of wrong with the voices for justice.

But protests also take other forms. Sometimes our protests are more subtle. Like when the catalogs fill your mailbox or you are attracted by the ads on TV and you persistently strive to resist the culture of consumption that surrounds us. That's a form of protest. Or your efforts to use your reusable shopping bag at the store. That's a form of protest. Or your attempts to forgive

a difficult person even when everyone else tells you to give up and walk away. That's a form of protest. Do you know what another form of protest is? Coming to church on Sunday morning. I bet you never thought about that. When we come to worship, we are protesting the powers that would have us believe we are sufficient unto ourselves. We are protesting the powers that would have us place our trust in money or possessions. We are protesting the powers that would have us live only for our wants and pleasures. We are protesting the powers that would have us distrust the stranger and hate our enemies. Coming to worship is itself a form of protest.

But we are not self-righteous in our protest. We do not pat ourselves on the back, congratulating ourselves for being such good people. Instead, we look to Jesus' Palm Sunday example of protest—his humble yet firm witness to another way of being in this world, to God's way of being in this world. He is our example of how to humble ourselves as witnesses to another way of being in this world.

So Palm Sunday is a parade in celebration of the arrival of the Sovereign One who comes in power. And Palm Sunday is a protest that openly confronts the forces of darkness with God's way of being in this world. But Palm Sunday is also a procession—a funeral procession.

We know about funeral processions. Long ago, after someone died, the congregation would accompany the grieving family as they walked behind the coffin from the church to the cemetery. Today, we do the same thing, only we typically get in our cars and drive in a long procession from the church to the cemetery. But the idea is the same. We accompany not only the body to its final resting place, but we join the grieving relatives in solidarity and compassion and they make that journey with their loved one.

The disciples and the others who greeted Jesus that first Palm Sunday didn't realize it was a funeral procession, but Jesus knew. He knew he was walking to his death. He knew he

was making the journey to his grave. Accompanied by those he loved, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was his funeral procession.

And so on Palm Sunday, those who love Jesus, you and I, still accompany him symbolically in his funeral procession. We join him as he walks in commitment to God's way of being in this world. But Palm Sunday is not just Jesus' funeral procession. It is also our own funeral procession we are taking part in. Christians speak about dying with Christ that we might rise with Christ. As we walk with Jesus to the cross, we are walking ourselves to the cross. The cross calls us to die to the ways of darkness and sin, to the ways of selfishness and greed, to the ways of hatred and division. This Palm Sunday marks our funeral procession, as we die to an old way of being that we might rise to new life in Christ's way of being. Because this funeral procession, you see, doesn't just end at the grave. This funeral procession for Christ and for ourselves will lead to a glorious deed of power. But more on that next week.