

Manifesto of an Upside Down Kingdom
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Rev. Rebecca Jess

Another Palm Sunday is here. In celebration of that long-ago day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem and was greeted by smiling faces, uplifted voices, a carpet of coats, and waving palms, we too sing our loud Hosannas and wave our palms and pin palm-cross reminders onto our clothes. In fact, all four gospel accounts of Palm Sunday have the same heading in the Bible translation we use at Armour Heights: Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. Now, those headings aren't original to the Bible, they have been added in over time by different translators and interpreters to help break down the Bible into manageable chunks. But even if we ignore those headings, we very often hear this story referred to as "Jesus' Triumphal Entry." You can google those words and come up a whole slew of articles and blogs and lessons and paintings based around that moment in Jesus' life. In fact, "Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem" even has its own Wikipedia page. Palm Sunday is a day that feels glorious, victorious, triumphant. But is triumph really a good thing? Is a triumphal entry something Jesus really stood for?

A triumphal procession, no matter when in history it occurs, most often marks or celebrates a victory. It indicates a win. And it often gets connected to war, to battle, to one power up against another. And perhaps that isn't so terrible. We celebrate various kinds of battles where good triumphs over evil in books and movies and fairy tales all the time: when Voldemort's blind desperation for power leads to Harry Potter's victory ; when Luke Skywalker, aided in his targeting ability by using the Force, sees to the destruction of the Death Star; when Hansel and Gretel successfully trick the witch. We can all get on board with a story where good triumphs and evil loses. Down with the bad guys, celebrate the good guys! Though, I wouldn't say that's what Jesus wanted. Jesus didn't want to stomp out or eradicate the religious leaders who sought his downfall, his loss of popular interest, and his eventual death. He didn't ride into Jerusalem to prove that he was better than them, or to laugh at their attempts to regain authority. He didn't ride in to show off as "the winner." So why do we call his entry "triumphal"?

Let's also consider triumphalism. The best definition of triumphalism I've ever read is from a theologian who describes it as "the tendency in all strongly held world views... to present themselves as full and complete accounts of reality, leaving little if any debate or difference of opinion." This tendency is triumphalist in the sense that it triumphs—at least in its own estimation—over all ignorance, uncertainty, doubt, incompleteness, and any other point of view.¹ It probably also makes you think of politics.

Maybe it makes you think of the Liberal Party of Canada; a party that wants you to believe that their account of Canadians' realities is completely accurate; that they know what Canadians want and need in terms of truth and reconciliation, climate change, national pharmacare, trade. And they believe that their party is the only one that can meet those needs for Canadians and they plan to triumph over those who think otherwise. Or maybe triumphalism makes you think of the PC Party of Ontario; a party that wants you to believe that their account of Ontarians' realities is completely accurate; that they know what Ontarians want and need in terms of public education, carbon taxes, healthcare, the ability to serve alcohol as early as 9am. And they believe that their party is the only one that can meet those needs for Ontarians and they plan to triumph over those who think otherwise.

A recent example of this is the walk-out that students across Ontario staged during school hours in order to protest the cuts and changes to education that have been put forward by our provincial government. Not long after the walk-out occurred, the Education Minister wrote a public response concluding that students were the pawns of teachers and unions. She implied that these students were manipulated into engaging in this walk-out. The Education Minister's world view—and the Premier's world view—are such that, for them and the rest of their party, it is a fact that these students are being used by adults with more authority than them. Their world views include a belief that youth do not have strong enough political views to want to take action on their own. They may even believe that youth are not capable of organizing themselves effectively. They believe there is no debate with students themselves, only with those who try to exploit students. Fortunately, though, students will not be

¹ Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*.

undermined so easily. Never underestimate the determination of youth! The students who planned and orchestrated the Ontario-wide protest fashioned their own open letter making it clear that what the Education Minister touted as a full and complete account of what had happened was utterly false. They didn't need the encouragement of teachers or unions or parents or other adults to help them see what their future as students in Ontario would look like—they figured it out for themselves, and they didn't like it. So they took action. But that didn't stop triumphalist politics from conveying a different story.

Of course, triumphalism exists outside of politics, too. It exists in religion. It may be easy to think, “ah, yes, I can imagine how triumphalism is a part of all those fundamental religions, or in those overtly evangelical forms of Christianity,” but it exists in our own denomination, as well. There are those who use their own sort of “holiness code” to decide who can and can't be a part of a congregation by outlining acceptable Presbyterian behaviour. These “codes” are interpreted from scripture or doctrine or church governance with a specific world view—presumed to be the “right” world view. They use these world views, these self-defined holiness codes, as the “measuring rod to limit behaviour and restrict others from becoming part of the community rather than as hope for community involvement.” The Rev. Mark Tremblay, a Presbyterian minister in Calgary, posted a blog this past week about how this brand of triumphalism is being used in our church to exclude members of the LGBTQ community. He writes that these advocates of a strict holiness code “convince themselves that they, and only they, know what love is. They, and only they, may proclaim and build the boxes that shelter the purity of their beliefs. Those that think and live differently, who may dare to live a different or alternative view, are quickly labelled as heretics, as revisionists or as progressives. To promote unconditional love is seen as a threat to the security of the holiness code and an affront to the sanctity of god's commandments.”² Now, Rev. Tremblay doesn't shy away from using strong and specific language here, but his overall message speaks to the ways that triumphalism in Christianity “confuses and distorts”³ because it presents God's character in a very straightforward, unchanging,

² Rev. Mark Tremblay, *Spirited Reflection: And hatred is not a form of love*.

³ Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*.

and authoritarian way. It disallows us from really discussing who God is or what God wants for us—it presumes a scripted, unvarying, ineradicable argument of who God is. It is an argument made to silence our thoughts, our questions, our doubts. It is overwhelming in its certitude, which is why it is can be confusing: God’s plan in sending us Jesus wasn’t to overwhelm, but to befriend. What would our faith be if we could not ask questions? How would our faith deepen if we did not have the opportunity to express doubts? How could we truly show love if it is believed to come from a hierarchical God who sits above us and defines, unequivocally, what it means to be divine, what it means to be human?

Triumph, triumphal, triumphalism—if these words can hold such negative connotations, then why is Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem triumphant? Let’s turn back to our passage from Zechariah. Zechariah’s prophecy describes a king who comes for the people of Zion, of Jerusalem. And this king is has characteristics that distinguish him from other kings. First, his rule is righteous and just; the messianic king holds within him the hope of an oppressed people. Second, he is saved by God; in other words, he rules with God’s help and does not rely only on his own strength. Third, he is humble, not proud and boastful. This last one is made particularly clear from the fact that this king will ride a donkey, a colt; an animal that’s used in service, unlike a horse which is used in war. This king brings humility, peace, and hope instead of war, battle, and a thirst for power and authority. Within this passage, triumph and victory are not glorifications of the battle bow, but are instead the context for peace to reign.

Jesus’ entrance in Luke follows the plot we read in Zechariah. He enters Jerusalem humbly, on a donkey, and his disciples sing the words of the Psalms: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” This is a mission of peace. This is a mission of hope for a people who live enslaved and indebted; for a people who are sick, poor, viewed as unwelcome outsiders.

It seems that “triumph” is a paradox. Jesus does not triumph with weapons or power or war horses. Jesus does not triumph with political prowess or family wealth or triumphalist tendencies. And yet, Jesus still triumphs. Jesus triumphs with the truth of God’s upside down kingdom; a kingdom which turns our earthly value system on its head and focuses on radical generosity, servant leadership, peacemaking, forgiveness,

and deep piety that rejects religious hypocrisy. It's a kingdom where the manifesto states that God's love triumphs over all, and not just all of Jerusalem, over all of creation. It condemns greedy hands, power-hungry authority, injustice, triumphalism, apathy, indifference, and replaces it with freedom and new life, with peace, hope, and love. In this upside-down kingdom, value systems aren't used to restrict others from the community, they are turned on their heads as a means to gain further reach, to invite, to instill hope for greater community involvement and activity. In this upside-down kingdom, to triumph means discovering more of God's character. It means meeting Jesus where you are at. It means being willing to open yourself to the movement of the Spirit. To triumph means being able to ask questions of our faith, to have doubts, to challenge assumptions. Palm Sunday is a day of triumph because we can live with hope and faith in a God who seeks peace for all of creation, who forgives all of creation, who loves all of creation.

In this upside-down kingdom Jesus sits on a donkey on the Mount of Olives and chooses to enter into a city that at once celebrates him and reviles him. He chooses to enter into a world that doesn't truly understand what it means to live in an upside down way and winds his way down that mountain to a cross. He chooses to embrace rejection, betrayal, despair, because he also chooses hope in God; and with hope comes new life. With hope there is triumph. Amen.