

Two Parades — Rev. Steve Gillam

Wall Street United Church – March 29th, 2026

Luke 19:28-40 Message Version

After saying these things, Jesus headed straight up to Jerusalem. When he got near Bethphage and Bethany at the mountain called Olives, he sent off two of the disciples with instructions: “Go to the village across from you. As soon as you enter, you’ll find a colt tethered, one that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it. If anyone says anything, asks, ‘What are you doing?’ say, ‘His Master needs him.’”

The two left and found it just as he said. As they were untying the colt, its owners said, “What are you doing untying the colt?” They said, “His Master needs him.” They brought the colt to Jesus. Then, throwing their coats on its back, they helped Jesus get on. As he rode, the people gave him a grand welcome, throwing their coats on the street.

Right at the crest, where Mount Olives begins its descent, the whole crowd of disciples burst into enthusiastic praise over all the mighty works they had witnessed: Blessed is he who comes, the king in God’s name! All’s well in heaven! Glory in the high places!

Some Pharisees from the crowd told him, “Teacher, get your disciples under control!” But he said, “If they kept quiet, the stones would do it for them, shouting praise.”

This is Palm Sunday, the last Sunday in the season of Lent. Lent, however, continues all of this week, right through to Saturday, giving us the full 40 days.

The number 40 is significant in our sacred story telling. It represents a time of discernment, figuring out who we are or who we are called to be. Think of Noah, his family, and the animals. They were on the ark for a little over a year, but for 40 days and nights there was heavy raining and violent flooding. It's actually God who does the discerning in this story — God decides to hang the bow in the sky! We think of the pretty rainbow, but consider the weapon — the bow and arrow. God hangs a weapon in the sky and decides that violence isn't the answer. It's a time when God enters into relationship with humanity and creation.

Add to that the story of Moses leading his people for 40 years in the desert — a time for them to discern who they will be as they move from slavery to freedom. After Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River, he goes off into the wilderness for 40 days to figure

out how he will live out his ministry. Then, after the resurrection, the Risen Christ spends 40 days with the disciples before his ascension, giving them time to discern their own future and ministry. Our modern mythology also emphasizes the number 40 ... we say life begins at 40 (it takes us that long to figure out who we are!), and that we feel refreshed and renewed after 40 winks.

For me, Palm Sunday is a day calling us to a moment (or lifetime) of discernment. Who are we? And how will we live out our faith?

A lot of preachers and congregations combine the stories of Holy Week with today's story, making this Palm/Passion Sunday. I think they do it because most people don't go to church on Good Friday. We should go to church on Good Friday! It's important. Easter has so much more meaning if we have the complete experience. So, I'm only focusing on Palm Sunday today. There is so much in this sacred story.

To begin with, we acknowledge that it is highly likely that there were two parades going on that day.

First, the parade we know: Jesus rides a donkey into Jerusalem, surrounded by his followers. The image refers to the prophet Zechariah (chapter 9) saying that the Messiah will ride into the Holy City on "*a colt, the foal of a beast of burden*". That's one animal. (In Matthew's gospel there's a bit of confusion. Jesus seems to ride on 2 animals? A colt is a male horse or donkey under 4 years of age. A foal can be either male or female, less than a year old. It's a young donkey.)

They travel through Bethphage and Bethany, only a few miles from Jerusalem, and continue across the Mount of Olives. The crowd that gathers lay their cloaks on the road, wave branches, sing Hosanna, and praise God.

We know this parade.

The second parade might be unfamiliar to you. But this parade provides an important framework for the gospel story.

History records that Pontius Pilate came to Jerusalem at Passover time. (He lived in a mansion in Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast.) Passover is about the Exodus, when Moses led his people out of Egypt as they left slavery and became a freed people. It is a remembrance and a celebration of liberation. Living under the oppression of the Roman Empire, the atmosphere was tense and volatile during that year's liberation celebration. Pilate was there to represent Caesar and remind everyone of the Roman Empire's presence. Into the city, whose population during this important holiday was four times larger than usual, Pilate arrives with a dramatic display of imperial power, designed to intimidate.

We've seen the images on TV and in movies. We can imagine Pilate riding a decorated warhorse, followed by the cavalry, soldiers in armor waving swords, drums beating, Roman banners and gold eagles waving. Everything is designed to say, "*Have your little celebration, but don't forget that the Empire is here!*"

Unfortunately, that sounds all too familiar to us today. Our world today is witnessing similar displays of abusive power, violence, oppression, and intimidation. This second parade gives our story of Jesus on a humble donkey its context. The gospel story is more Protest than Parade.

When I was young, I loved the Palm Sunday story. It sounded fun and spontaneous. A crowd just gathered and joined Jesus, celebrating. However, in their book "*The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem*", Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan suggest that this parade didn't just happen. It was intentional, deliberate, and even subversive. Jesus meant this to be a counter demonstration to the grand and imposing military parade happening across the city. Jesus intentionally mocks the obscene pomp and circumstance of the Empire. Remember, he sends his disciples to get the donkey, as if this was all planned!

Jesus leads his followers in a peaceful but risky engagement against injustice. One of the names for Caesar was 'The Son of God'. Jesus says, "*Let us show you God*". The real Son of God rides in, proclaiming humility, justice, strength and peace.

(A shout-out of joy to all Americans who did the same thing with the "**No King**" marches!)

So, as I said, Palm Sunday is about discernment. Which parade would we have attended? Which one do we attend today? Our world today knows that same struggle. We make choices that support either gospel or empire, either justice or oppression, either humility or vanity. Which parade do we choose?

And we do choose. Our choices make a difference. We can't just say, "Oh, I'm not involved." "What I do doesn't make a difference." It does.

Humorous social commentator Will Rogers once said, "We can't all be heroes because somebody has to sit on the curb and clap as they go by." There is no innocent bystander or passive observer. The people standing on the curb are part of this as well. Everyone plays a role in this parade metaphor. As the living body of Christ, we choose who we will be, and how we will live. We choose which parade we follow.

I chose to read the story from Luke's gospel today because of the last lines. The Pharisees tell Jesus to make his followers be quiet. They don't want to draw attention and get the Romans angry. But Jesus laughs, and tells them that they just don't get it: even if they were quiet, the stones themselves would start praising God!

All of Creation gives voice to God's will. Psalm 98: *"Roar, sea, and every creature in you. Sing, earth, and all who live in you! Clap your hands, you rivers; you hills, sing together with joy before God. The Lord comes to rule the world with justice and fairness."*

Life itself understands what Jesus' parade represents. It is God's Creation standing up to injustice. We join the song of creation! We join the parade of the One who comes in God's name! We choose. We act. We raise our voices. *We love!*

Thanks be to God.