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March 29, 2015
Mark 11:1-11; 15:25-32

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church
Palm/Passion Sunday

RESPONDING TO A DIFFERENT KIND OF REIGN

Everyone loves a parade. In our country, there are the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, the Tournament of Roses Parade, St. Patrick's Day Parade, and the Mardi Gras Parade that would be among the most popular. Some might prefer our little local Labor Day parade, which also has the bands and the crowds watching, albeit on a much smaller scale.

What happened on that first Palm Sunday was not quite a parade. In some ways it was more like a procession. The people walking on the road into Jerusalem were not doing this to put on a show for others who were watching. There were no floats or marching bands. They were simply coming into the holy city for the Passover observance. This annual religious observance was the biggest gathering of the year in Jerusalem as that special time to celebrate God's deliverance of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. Some clearly dreamed of being delivered from another oppressor, this time, the Romans. Many of the people had walked for days to get there. Yes, it was festive. There probably was singing or the chanting of psalms among the marchers as they drew close to their destination. There would have been a fair amount of joy as they came over the Mount of Olives and could see the temple before them.

In other ways, however, the Palm Sunday procession was more like an inaugural parade, where a chosen leader would be moving toward the place from which that person would carry out his or her rule. There had been enthronement celebrations that were described in the Hebrew scriptures where people were welcoming a new monarch. At times the crowd had laid down their cloaks to make something like a red carpet over which the newly-crowned royalty would travel. There were certain times when branches of trees were cut and waved to celebrate a leader who had triumphed in battle. We see the similarities in the description of Palm Sunday. In the gospel account, we notice there is great attention given to the animal upon which Jesus would be riding. A donkey would actually be a fitting animal upon which would be riding a king who came in peace. Otherwise, it might be a war stallion that would be carrying the person receiving the acclamation. We see which one of those Jesus chose.

Referring to the one riding the donkey, the crowd cries out, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" They believe the Messiah, the one who would deliver them, is in their midst. And they anticipate they will have even greater reason to wave their palm branches when the Romans will have been run out of town. When Jesus arrives, he goes into the temple and looks around at everything there, but he does not establish that as the place from which he would rule.

The political threat Roman officials perceived from Jesus was the reason they crucified him, identifying the reason for his capital punishment on the sign that said, "The King of the Jews." They wanted to demonstrate that the great Roman Caesar would not be challenged by this or some other person who desired to sit on the throne. Actually, a throne was not

Jesus' desired destination. But people had a difficult time understanding a king who did not long for a throne. When he had been nailed on the cross, some of the Hebrew religious authorities would mock him, referring to him as a powerful 'King of Israel' who was about to die from the most shameful kind of death. In praise on Palm Sunday and in ridicule on Good Friday, royal language is used for Jesus.

In thinking about him as a royal figure, we might note that his reign is quite different from that of other kings. When has there been a monarch whose resources were as meager as were those of Jesus? From the stories of his life, we understand that he was born in a borrowed place and laid in a borrowed manger. As an adult, he traveled around with no place of his own to stay the night. We just heard that he rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey. He would eat his final meal in a borrowed room. When he was condemned to die on a cross, he would be wearing a cloak and sandals as his only material possessions, and the Roman soldiers would cast dice to see who got to take those. He would wear no crown but one made of thorns, placed on his head in ridicule. After he died, someone would place his body in a borrowed tomb.

Yet, Jesus did possess certain things that made his reign a lasting one that could extend even to us. He possessed a deep knowledge of the scriptures. That is how he knew the prophets expected the true ruler of God's people to be one who demonstrated humility.

Jesus possessed a deep sensitivity to those who had the greatest needs. He paid attention to the hurts of the poor and rich alike, addressing that which could twist a person out of shape, seeing how forgiveness could overcome shame and bitterness, ever looking for opportunities to heal the minds, bodies, and spirits of the people he met along the way.

His greatest possession was a love for every single person, even those who couldn't return his love. It was never a hovering, needy love, but rather a commitment to give all he could for the well-being of those around him. In the words of the early church, Jesus emptied himself.

These were the kind of possessions that define the reign of Jesus. One thing more he would seek – the hearts of those who wanted to journey with him. This was not someone who was starved for attention, who needed the adulation of those around him. Rather, he was seeking hearts so that the people could be freed from that which truly oppressed them, that can oppress us. Augustine would later write in a prayer to God, "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you." So we have an opportunity today, not so much to participate in a parade, but to be part of a processional, where the reign of our Lord Jesus is welcomed to process into our very hearts. Our hearts is the place from which Jesus rules, but it requires a choosing of submission over spectacle. As we welcome and receive the One who reigns over heaven and earth, the One who humbly frees us, we can then proclaim, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord and blessed are we who get to share the very blessings of God." Hosanna! Hosanna not just in the city streets – Hosanna in the highest heaven!