Sacred Processions

Psalm 119:1-2, 19-29 Mark 11:1-11

March 28, 2021

It’s been a while since any of us have been to a parade. COVID has prevented those energetic and celebratory events. I recently spoke with a town commissioner in Blowing Rock and they are struggling now to make a decision about the annual July 4th parade. I know we all hope it’s safe by then and we can celebrate. The last memorable parade I experienced was a Church World Service CROP hunger walk a few years ago. It was a beautiful day and was an energetic gathering, maybe a little like the parade we read about from Mark’s gospel this morning. CROP walkers gathered in front of Duke Chapel and it was not only a loud crowd, but people were taking pictures, and there was excitement and joy in the air. Now the CROP walk is not promoted or envisioned as a parade rather it’s described as a walk where “we walk because they walk.” It’s a “parade like” walk in solidarity with those who walk great distances to find water, food, shelter or safety every day. So it was a walk, but in some ways it was also a parade and a march. Parades and marches are usually characterized by a variety of people, sometimes with special costumes, the carrying of banners and signs, and a common message. The CROP walk had it all. I didn’t see anyone carrying signs, but there were posters placed along the route containing sobering statistics about hunger in our world. There were no special costumes, but people were wearing different kinds of hats and walking gear, some had their dogs with them, and many were sharing the message by wearing CROP walk t-shirts. It was a walk, a parade, and carried a hint of being a march and even a protest as we were naming the hunger of the world, stating that the way things are is not the way things have to be, and we were standing in solidarity with our local and the global community of people who travel difficult paths and walk great distances just to live.

Today our Lenten journey culminates in this Palm Sunday parade and the somber and shocking events of this week, as we remember Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, crucifixion and death. To remember it all, even the hard parts, is important for our spiritual health. There are enough prosperity gospel, denial of reality messages out there that leave us empty, disillusioned, or struggling with where God is in the midst our hurts and needs for healing. Our faith story affirms the mystery of death and resurrection, endings and beginnings, and that God has the last word even in the face of death. And so, before we celebrate resurrection next Sunday, the shout of life, and the proclamation that love wins, we enter into the whole, Holy Week and reflect on Jesus’ passion and what that means for the struggles we all face along our way. For a few weeks know, we’ve been paying attention to the spiritual journey. We have reflected on the real struggle of discerning our way on the spiritual path. This is a Lenten discipline based on Jesus’ path to Jerusalem. His path included an encounter with Nicodemus who was sneaking around Jerusalem at night to secretly talk with Jesus. As he went, Jesus also sat by a well on a hot day while he and a Samaritan woman had an uncomfortable conversation that concluded with the refreshing welcome of God. Jesus’s path to Jerusalem also included the healing of a blind man. It was a little yucky as Jesus made mud with spit and put it on the man’s eyes, yet the man’s insight profoundly showed the blindness of the people around him. Now, on the brink of Holy Week, we stand watching as Jesus and some followers parade into Jerusalem. We do this knowing there will be another parade later in this story, where cheers of hope and joy will morph into mocking shouts of fear and ridicule. Historians remind us of the complicated dynamic in the city since another parade happened a few days earlier. Due to the crowds in attendance for Passover, Roman reinforcements would have marched into the city geared up and ready to keep the peace by show of force. This parade of Jesus and his followers, a parade of liberation from oppression seems like a blip on the radar in light of the power and influence of Rome.

Today, we are invited to enter this story and I wonder what we might recall about parades, marches and protests in which we have participated. Maybe some participated in civil rights marches in the 1960’s or the Moral Monday gatherings here in Raleigh. Maybe some went to the Million Women March, or you have walked in a CROP Walk or another parade/march for the hungry or another justice issue. It always feels right and important when we march and protest and it is... yet sometimes when things don’t change rapidly it feels like a blip on the radar. One writer has suggested using the term sacred processions when we think about Palm Sunday, Holy Week and the parades, marches, and protests in our lives. To see these marches and protests as sacred changes our focus. Sacred processions are a part of our faith tradition from all the way back to the story of the Hebrew people processing out of Egypt, through the wilderness and into the promised land…to ancient worship processions into the temple, and even to this Palm Sunday story. As they reflected on this parade into Jerusalem, the writers of the gospels saw it as God infused. In the story, the disciples found a donkey for Jesus as he instructed and Matthew saw God at work fulfilling a prophecy. Later, the crowds began to cheer and it looked and sounded like an ancient worship procession. It was a parade, somewhat of a march, and in some ways a protest proclaiming a kingdom of mercy and justice and that the way things are is not the way they have to be.

As we think about it, we all have particular sacred processions in our lives. Some of them happen on days like today as we make our way through the morning and to our screen for virtual prayer and community. Some sacred processions happen on downtown streets when we march and protest. Our faith tradition holds fast to the sacredness of life and as those who see all creation as sacred and God infused, we are always on sacred processions. With that in mind, I invite us in a few moments to consider one sacred procession in our lives. I’ll share one of mine as a starter. Being a parent has been and continues to feel like a sacred procession. It was one thing when they were young. I was sort of in control and yet they were growing and changing and I was pressed to change too. Now that they are grown, it’s different. I have not control at all, and they are not changing as much... it still feels sacred to be their dad, but now it feels more like we are walking side by side. Our sacred procession may be about inner journeys, relationship journeys, or community journeys. Let’s take 30 seconds now to reflect. What is the sacred procession you recalled? Who are the people we have walked and stood with? Let’s be thankful for them. What is sacred about these processions? Love, care, justice? What are we saying and hearing as we make our way?

Our Lenten experience and this sacred procession of Jesus invites us to reflect on our journey. It’s difficult to hold on and discern together in the interim time. St Giles has been making its way on a sacred procession now for over 50 years. There have been bumps along the way when things did not happen as planned and it did not feel like a sacred procession. Usually there are both helpful and unhelpful things along the way. Recently, those who participated in the Heritage Focus point event, shared stories that sure did sound joyful and sacred. In a few weeks, your transition team will be asking you to prayerfully reflect on your mission, why you are here, why St. Giles exists here on Oak Park road. I’m guessing it will sound again like a sacred procession, because of the many wonderful sacred relationships, joyful sacred meals, meaningful sacred acts, and heartfelt sacred words that have guided you and excited you about the mission of Christ in this place. Thanks be to God who walks with us and guides us on this sacred journey…