

ON LEAVING THE SIDEWALK

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Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Luke 19:28-40

“As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen...”

Luke 19:37

For a conquering hero entering Jerusalem, his approach was surprisingly humble. No, I'm not talking about Jesus' ride into the city. I'm talking about a triumphal entry that happened just over a century ago. On December 11, 1917, the British General Edmund Allenby entered Jerusalem on foot, through the Jaffa Gate. With him was his guerrilla commander, T.E. Lawrence: the famed Lawrence of Arabia.

The General's approach, as I've said, was humble: and deliberately so. It was out of respect for the holy city, he said, that he dismounted from his vehicle and *walked* through the gate. Immediately he issued a proclamation declaring that the centuries-old arrangements by which various religious groups looked after the holy sites would remain intact.

But make no mistake about it: General Allenby *had* conquered the city. He wrested it away from the Ottoman Turks, who had ruled it for centuries. And he did it without a shot being fired.

He used a clever bit of subterfuge. First, he sent out false radio transmissions, indicating he was going to attack Gaza instead. Then, he sent a British officer to sneak up to the Turkish lines and leave a bloodstained saddlebag on the ground. In it were fake plans for a British attack on Gaza.

The result was just what Allenby had hoped for: the Turks shifted all their troops to the south: which is why he was able to just walk into Jerusalem, with no opposition.

World War 1 in Palestine was not over that day. The British continued to battle the Turks for many months. But Jerusalem was theirs.

General Allenby may have seemed like a humble man as he entered Jerusalem, but that was only a show. As he walked into the city, the General is said to have remarked, “Only now have the crusades ended.” Prime Minister David Lloyd George, back home, described the victory in triumphalistic terms. He called it “a Christmas present for the British people.”

That’s the sort of thing you hear from conquering heroes. They’re not shy about their achievements. And they want everyone to know it.

Was that what the people of Jerusalem were thinking as Jesus made his famous ride through the city gate: and as they lined his route, spreading their cloaks before him, like a red carpet?

The conventional interpretation — the one I learned in Sunday School when I was a kid — said yes: the people had the wrong idea about Jesus. They thought he was a political revolutionary, whose goal was to rally the populace and start an insurrection to drive the Romans out.

But take a few steps back and look again. There's simply no way the cheering crowds mistook this little parade for an invasion.

The people of Jerusalem knew invasions. They also knew what military parades were all about. They were old hands at being invaded by foreign armies. Over the centuries, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome had all taken their turn at conquering the land and humiliating its citizens.

The memory of Roman military parades would have been especially vivid. Typically, the victorious general would ride in, driving a chariot or sitting astride a magnificent war-horse. Before him would march legions upon legions of his troops. Also in the procession — barefoot, in chains, whipped along by their captors — would be the prisoners of war: miserable unfortunates (who, after they'd been displayed to the cheering multitude, were not long for this world).

The crowds knew the drill: stand there along the edges of the road and cheer. Make a good impression for the general. Maybe if you do, he will be magnanimous in victory and won't be so hard on you and your neighbors.

Jesus was no general. His followers were no professional army. The very way he rode into the city – on a donkey (as it says in the gospel of John) or on a colt (as it says here in Luke, and also in Mark), or on both a donkey *and* a colt (as it says in Matthew) — was hardly the sort of conveyance favored by the rich and powerful.

So what *was* Jesus doing, with his triumphal entry, if he didn't intend to lead an armed insurrection? To answer that question, you have to know something about another parade that took place that very day (or, if not that same day, on a day very close to it).

Every year during Passover — the Jewish festival that swelled Jerusalem's population from its usual 50,000 to at least 200,000 — the Roman governor of Judea would ride up to Jerusalem from his coastal residence in the west. He and his legions would come — in all their imperial majesty — to remind those throngs of Jewish pilgrims that Rome demanded their complete loyalty, obedience, and submission. The Jews could celebrate their annual festival of freedom from the Egyptians, if they wanted. That was ancient history. Pontius Pilate was not afraid

of it. But if they dared speak a word against the power of Rome, his response would be swift and terrible.

You can only understand what Jesus and his followers were up to by thinking not only about their little parade, but about that other parade as well: the one entering the city from the other side.

Jesus is very deliberate about what he's doing. We see it clearly here in Luke's account. When he says, "Go into that village, where you'll find a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here," this is clearly a prearrangement. There's even a password. "If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'"

Sure enough, that's how it happens. The disciples enter the village, find the colt, and someone challenges them. They speak the password, and the animal is theirs.

Jesus has planned this little procession out very carefully.

But what is it? If it's not a military challenge to the Romans, why does he bother?

Very likely, he's making fun of the powers-that-be. He's engaging in what some people today call "street theater" — a satirical demonstration, lampooning the high and mighty.

Jesus doesn't want to rule Jerusalem as King. He's a religious reformer. He wants to call the Jewish people back to the true worship of God. If he can demonstrate, by means of his little parade, how insignificant and ridiculous the civil rulers appear in God's eyes, he'll focus the people's devotion on what's truly important.

It's a very, very dangerous strategy. Jesus knows he could end up dead — and in fact, as we all know, that's exactly what happens. There's simply too much money, too much power, riding on the status quo for an upstart rabbi from the provinces to call the whole system into question.

So, what were the people of Jerusalem thinking, as they lined the avenue, laid their cloaks on the street and shouted "Hosanna"?

Some of them, surely, were his diehard supporters. Others found themselves on the fence: wondering whether Jesus could be trusted and whether his movement was strong enough to succeed. Still others were not so much *for* Jesus as *against* the puppet King Herod, and the Roman soldiers who kept him in wine, women and song. "Herod's enemy is my enemy," they'd proclaim, then cheer Jesus all the louder. Maybe there were a few in that crowd, as well, who feared and distrusted Jesus — who were agents of the occupying powers — although, in the jubilant

atmosphere, they didn't dare speak against him publicly. No doubt, they brought a full report to their contacts in the palace.

I'd like to ask you to recall with me, now, the last parade you ever watched: not on TV, but in person — and not in New York, either, but in a much smaller town. Maybe it was Memorial Day or the Fourth of July, or perhaps a high-school Homecoming.

In the typical small-town parade, there's a marching band or two, some homemade floats, a few classic cars, and a convertible with local dignitaries sitting in the back, waving to the crowds. Following it up is a procession of fire engines, ambulances and other emergency vehicles, driven by the proud volunteers who maintain them. At the very end, a police cruiser advances slowly, lights flashing. It's all good fun.

Once that final police car passes, the people lining the sidewalks have a decision to make: they can either turn and go home, or they can step out into the street and join the parade. The official parade has passed them by: but there's an unofficial one's that's only beginning.

Each year, as the season of Lent draws to a close, Palm Sunday comes upon us. We all know it's coming: it's the Sunday before Easter, and — if Easter's late enough, as it is this year — it's often one of the first really nice Spring weekends. Palm Sunday's traditionally a day of jubilation: a day when Sunday School kids have fun waving palm branches, and singing songs that have the word "Hosanna" in them.

Everybody comes out to cheer Jesus. And why not? Jesus Christ is probably the single most popular person in human history. When pollsters ask people that question, "If you could meet one historical figure in person, who would it be?" Jesus always tops the list. Everybody loves a parade: especially a parade with Jesus in it.

Yet, just as it happened in Jerusalem of old, most of the church crowds swiftly fall away. Only a small number of Palm Sunday worshipers actually step off the sidewalk, and begin to accompany Jesus on his journey to the cross.

Just a glance at worship attendance figures confirms it: the number of people who turn out on Maundy Thursday is a mere fraction of those who sing "Hosanna!" on Palm Sunday — and the even larger group that sings "Jesus Christ is Risen Today" a week hence.

Lots of Christians go directly from the Hosannas of Palm Sunday to the Alleluias of Easter — without ever stopping anywhere else in between. This makes Holy Week appear to be a rollicking good time: all sugar and no vinegar, all light and no darkness.

That is, to put it bluntly, a distorted view: not only of the gospel, but of life in general. Lots of folks today would love to find a church that's full of "nice" people, who never suffer or struggle very much, and that doesn't demand much of them. A "nice" church like that would never mention sin, or guilt, or doubt. It would never ask them to make a financial pledge, nor even throw more than a buck or two into the plate (the same amount, you know, their parents used to contribute — even though their income is, in most cases, vastly greater).

Such a church would do not a thing to aid the poor, nor to mention any social issue remotely close to politics. Don't you know, that would only get people riled up — and who wants to rock the boat? A nice church like that would never *dream* of asking its members to go out and share the good news — to do something so bold as inviting a friend to come worship with them.

Lots of people today, too, would love to live a *life* that proceeds directly from Palm Sunday to Easter. No sickness... no family troubles... no

unemployment... no shortage of pocket money. Just think positive, say your bedtime prayers (if that's your habit), and everything will come out OK.

“From Hosanna to Alleluia: that’s the life for me! Who wants to step off the sidewalk and join that poor excuse for a parade, anyway? Bad things happen in the street, you know. People get run over. People get crucified. No, I’ll just stay on the sidewalk, thank you. I’ll cheer the rest of you on: just look at my palm branch: how good I am at waving it! Hosanna! Hosanna!”

You can’t follow Jesus unless you step off the sidewalk. In the words of Søren Kierkegaard, Jesus doesn’t want admirers, he wants followers. That means you follow him into the Temple, and look on as he makes trouble there: getting himself on the Jerusalem Chamber of Commerce blacklist. It means you follow him into the homes and lives of people who are sick, or poor, or outcast minorities. It means you’ll take a special interest in children, as well as the frail elderly (remember that, next time we ask for a Sunday School teacher, or for someone to give a ride to a fellow worshiper who can no longer drive). It means you’ll continually ask yourself the question, “What spiritual gifts has the Lord given me, and what do those gifts uniquely qualify me to do in the service of Christ?” It means you’ll stop thinking about giving some of your time back to the Lord, and — to quote a timeworn advertising slogan — *just do it*.

Right now, we need a few good members to take charge of the food needs of the church: to serve on a cuisine team (doesn't that sound wonderful?). The book of Acts tells of those early Christians who "broke bread together...with glad and generous hearts." Eating together is so central to the common life of any congregation. Take my word for it: if you say, "Count on me to join that group," what you do will be so appreciated!

But you have to get off the sidewalk.

In the words of theologian and novelist C.S. Lewis, "Christianity, if false, is not important. If Christianity is true, however, it is of infinite importance. What it cannot be is moderately important."

So, I invite you to observe Holy Week in such a way that you do leave the sidewalk, and journey with our Lord through his arrest, trial and crucifixion. (This Maundy Thursday, 7 p.m.: we'll tell the story!) Only if you walk with our Lord through his passion will you truly grasp the wonder of his resurrection. Only then will you understand what price he paid so you and I may live free.

Let us pray:

We close our eyes, O Lord.

We silence the chatter in our minds.

We center our thoughts:

and what we hear is the murmur of a distant multitude.

The sound grows louder:

**the cries of “Hosanna,”
the laughter of children,
the buzz of excitement.
Is the song they are singing our song, too?
Dare we offer our praises
not only in the silence of our minds,
but with our feet as we walk,
our hands as we help,
our wills as we commit them wholly to you?
Make the “Hosannas” our song, too, O Lord!**

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