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It was Passover, which was such an important event, all the rulers had to be in Jerusalem. The custom was for people to go out to the gates of the city to greet their arrival. And the rulers were good at making an entrance.

Rome's vassal King Herod lived in a palace in Tiberius, which was north on the Sea of Galilee. When he arrived in Jerusalem for the festivities, it was always with an entourage—all the king's riches parading by the people.

But these were riches he had taken from the people.

Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, preferred to stay on the Mediterranean coast in Caesarea. But he also had to be in Jerusalem at Passover, especially since it commemorated the liberation of the Hebrews from an oppressive king in Egypt. Pilate knew the Zealots would be using Passover to stir up trouble. So, he rode into town demonstrating who was in control. The Roman procession was always so dramatic. The great golden eagle, held high on a pole, led the way. The trumpeters and battle pennants of Rome's victorious conquests followed. Then came the foot soldiers, horsemen, and powerful chariots dragging captive Zealots behind in chains. Everyone got the message.

I grew up near New York City, which hosts lots of parades meant to entertain and celebrate. As a boy I vividly remembered being in awe of the huge, inflated animals bobbing down the avenue. Occasionally there would also be demonstrations on the streets, which are like parades but with an attitude. Demonstrations are not trying to entertain anyone. They're trying to make a statement.

Ancient parades were actually demonstrations. They had a purpose and wanted to make a statement. When Herod arrived in town with the symbols of wealth, he was saying this is what you wish you had, and if you play along with Rome, like I do, you may get to keep some of what little you do have. When Pilate arrived with the symbols of Rome's power, he was saying don't dare resist us. There was nothing new about the symbols of wealth and power. In more subtle forms they were paraded by the people most of their days.

This is the part where pastors are expected to say that power and wealth are not important. But let's be careful. It has long been the inclination of the privileged to say power and money don't matter. But if you drive just a few miles from our church, you'll enter some poor neighborhoods filled with people that believe having the power and money to create your own future is precious—so precious it ought to be shared.

Jesus would agree with the poor. He talked about money and power a great deal. So let us avoid any pietistic reassurances in church that we don't care about money and power. We ought to care about it. The question for the followers of Jesus is how should we use it? If like Herod and Pilate you hoard it in a vain attempt to control your own life, you'll still lose your life and hurt others along the way. But if you use what you have to bring a little more hope into the world, you'll find your life and help others to find theirs.

One year in Jerusalem there was a third parade at Passover. This Jesus of Nazareth, who had been rumored to perform some pretty impressive miracles, had just raised Lazarus from the dead. In his gospel, John tells us that a great crowd of people went out from the city to greet Jesus when he arrived because they had either seen or heard about what he did for Lazarus. Here was a man who could raise the dead!

“So the people took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him saying, ‘Hosanna. [which means save us] Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!’” These people are not interested in a powerless Jesus. Power was exactly what they are cheering, and specifically the power to save. “Hosanna.”

Since we are told the crowd was great in size, we cannot know what all of them were thinking as they cheered for Jesus' arrival into town. Maybe some were thinking about the day 160 years earlier when their ancestors put palm branches down before the warhorse of the Jewish liberator Judas Maccabees who entered Jerusalem to defeat the occupying Seleucid army that had desecrated their temple. Maybe they were hoping Jesus would be exactly who their own religious leaders feared he would be—a liberator arriving on Passover. The leaders feared this because they thought Jesus was launching a movement that would threaten the Romans who would then destroy their nation and temple. (John 11:48) And just maybe, some in that great crowd thought that if Jesus had the power to raise the dead, he could raise their hopes for life that long remained dead and buried.

“And then,” we're told, “Jesus found a donkey and sat on it.” The next line is so precious: “His disciples did not understand these things at first.” Right. But here is what they did understand: They knew that if Jesus was a liberator king, he should be on a warhorse, not a donkey. They knew there was already a warrant out for Jesus' arrest and Jerusalem was the last place they should be. They knew this parade was not going to end well.

You know even more than the disciples do at this point because this is not your first Holy Week. So, on Palm Sunday it's tempting to say, “Don't get your hopes up. Good Friday is coming, and Jesus is headed for a cross. Maybe we had better settle for life under Herod and Pilate.”

When I was a college student in New York taking an art appreciation course, our professor discovered there were three different renditions of Romeo and Juliet being performed off Broadway. He thought it would be a fascinating assignment to have the class attend all three of these plays and then write a paper comparing them. By the time I got to the third performance I hated Shakespeare. It was all I could do to keep from screaming at Juliet to wake up before Romeo killed himself. “Don't do it, Romeo! I've got this story down.”

Maybe you want to join the disciples on Palm Sunday in telling Jesus, “Don't do it. Don't go to Jerusalem. We know the story and it's going to take a bad turn later this week.” Could this be the reason that, according to Luke, the Pharisees told Jesus to tell the people to be quiet. Were they in essence saying, “Jesus, make them stop. It will only heighten the tragedy if you get their hopes up. Because Jesus you know, and we know, what is waiting for you up ahead.”? But Jesus said, “If I tell the people to be quiet, the very stones will cry out.”

Again, we don't know what everyone in the great crowd was thinking that shouted “Hosanna.” But it is probable that in this crowd was Blind Bartimaeus who needs a new nickname because now he can see, and Zacchaeus the little sinner from Jericho, and Lazarus the dead man who is now alive. The crowd had to include hungry people who have been fed, sick people who have been healed, and sinners who have been forgiven. So, what we do know is that all of them were thinking they didn't used to have a hope in the world. But in Jesus they found a great, unruly hope from one who could raise the dead and change the way it is for all of us.

Jesus didn't come to Jerusalem to defeat Rome. He came to defeat death and give us great hope that always rises again. Great hope. According to the last words of the Pharisees in our text today, the whole world is going to follow hope.

When a society loses its great hopes, then it lives as if it can squander today because it thinks nothing better is coming down the road. The economists tell us that is what we are doing with our indebtedness. The sociologists tell us that is what we are doing with our divided, polarized communities. The ecologists tell us that is what we are doing with our planet that is now in such trouble even the stones are crying out for salvation. We are a people who must have hope, or we'll destroy ourselves. We must believe that something, or someone, is coming down the road.

Today in churches all over the world, Christians are having to face the parade of Jesus. Some are embarrassed by the naïve vision of it all. Others are singing, “Blessed is the coming reign of Christ.”

What about you? What do you say? It all depends on your choices about hope. Amen.