April 5, Palm Sunday A (Matthew 21:1–11)

Triumphal entries have a certain formula. Jesus does it all wrong.

by Katie Hines-Shah in the March 25, 2020 issue

Read the author's column on the Passion Sunday readings.

Churches still hold Holy Week services, but attendance has dropped. Many worshipers don't attend between Palm Sunday and Easter—causing some church leaders to worry that the week can devolve into triumphalism, the parade at its beginning predictably leading to an empty tomb at its end. Many churches now shorten or even omit Palm Sunday celebrations, choosing instead to observe Passion Sunday.

While there is merit to hearing the whole story of Jesus' Passion on a single Sunday, Palm Sunday itself is more than just a happy parade. This triumphal entry of Jesus is not like the typical triumphal entries of empire, nor does it yield the same result. The careful preacher may, with the Palm Sunday story alone, lift up a dissonance present throughout Jesus' Passion, made complete at Easter dawn.

In their book *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan contrast Jesus' triumphal entry with Pontius Pilate's. A present-day audience has other examples of triumphal entries from empires closer to home. The Nazis entering Paris, the obligatory May Day parades in communist countries, North Korean military displays, and white nationalists' public rallies fit the same bill.

The trappings of these triumphal entries are well known. The latest in military machinery is on display, whether it be horses and chariots or missiles, tanks, and large-capacity rifles. The people respond with accolades, whether because they are paid in denarii and circus games or because they are threatened by their party leader and the secret police. The leader is an undisputed strongman. Whether he be Pilate or Caesar, Hitler or Kim Jong-un, his face—and it is always a *he*—is known throughout the land. He uses his parade to bolster his own power and position and

that of a select ruling class. The religious establishment quickly falls in line. The triumphal entry displays the might of empire, simultaneously encouraging the few in power while frightening the masses into subservience.

Jesus does it all wrong. Instead of entering Jerusalem on a tank, Jesus uses a tractor. Matthew, perhaps misreading the poetry of the Septuagint, has Jesus ride into Jerusalem on not one but two animals, both a donkey and a colt. Neither an army nor the rich and famous accompany Jesus on his march. Instead his disciples, a ragtag group of fishermen, common folk, and at least one disreputable tax collector, make up the entourage.

The crowds themselves may not even be from Jerusalem. These are, perhaps, the very people Jesus healed and fed, country folk too desperate to wait at home for help and too poor to buy their own lunch. Waving palm branches and throwing down their cloaks, they make an unscripted celebration. There's no goose-stepping here, no coordinated show of gratitude with ribbons or cards. According to Matthew, the people of Jerusalem don't even know who Jesus is. There are no marble busts of this messiah, no propaganda posters or laudatory TV interviews. Jesus is an unknown.

Is it any wonder that later in this chapter, religious officials will question Jesus' authority, eventually seeking to have him arrested? The establishment fears Jesus and the masses shout his praise—it's a reversal of the whole point of a triumphal entry.

But Jesus isn't the only one. Matthew is keen to connect Jesus to Hebrew scripture. The quotation in our Gospel reading is an amalgamation of messianic prophecies from Isaiah and Zechariah. The king who would save Jerusalem comes not in a show of might but humbly. This image of the king on a donkey evokes other unlikely heroes of Judaism: younger sons, barren women, foreigners. Jesus' humility calls to mind his ancestor David, a shepherd boy who put all his trust in God and became king. The rise of ones like this is so unlikely it can only be interpreted as an act of God. The crowds cry out praise and bless the one who comes in God's name.

There are contemporary examples of these alternative triumphal entries, too. Martin Luther King Jr. led the people on foot to Washington, D.C. Mahatma Gandhi wore a lungi on the Salt March in India. Greta Thunberg, a mere teenager, stood before the UN with her hair in braids. The masked protesters continue their struggle in the streets of Hong Kong. They are joined by countless others around the world whose

names and faces are not known by history. Suffragists seeking the vote, labor organizers demanding worker rights, indigenous people standing up for their native lands, schoolchildren protesting gun violence, women gathered to call for change. They follow in Jesus' path knowing full well that the accolades they hear can, and often do, devolve into mockery and violence.

After all, these alternative triumphal entries threaten the status quo. John the Baptist was martyred, as were most of Jesus' disciples. Gandhi and King were assassinated. Current protest leaders face ridicule and worse. While violence need not be inevitable, the Palm Sunday parade and all its successors boldly proclaim that humble heroes know the whole Passion story from start to finish and continue their work anyway.

Hosanna means "save us," and there are people who need to be saved even now, even if it costs something. There are some things that are worth dying for. "Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord." For those who do the work of God there are unexpected blessings: hope when all seems hopeless, peace beyond all understanding, love beyond measure, life beyond death.

In other words, the parade at the beginning does indeed lead to an empty tomb at the end. It's a different kind of triumphal entry, but one more lasting and more sure.