

The Choreographed Christ

Matthew 21:1-11

It's hard not to be a fan of success. When the UCONN men's and women's basketball teams parade around Hartford later today, they will be hailed as heroes by the throngs who will line the parade route. I don't expect palm branches to be strewn on the ground, but championship tee shirts and caps will likely be everywhere. It's a celebration of their amazing success, as expected and as surprising as two teams could ever be.

The celebration comes not because we didn't anticipate the possible outcome; in fact, as far as the women were concerned, it would have been startling and certainly disappointing had they not won. Yet, suppose this victory parade had taken place *last* Sunday just *prior* to the final games; the take on it might be quite different! UCONN would have been pilloried by the national media and the rest of the basketball world for a rather presumptuous display of Husky pride. Even in our own minds, we likely would have been haunted by our own hubris— overconfidence would have worried us about “snake-bite” that occurs with those who hoist the trophy before winning the game, and tempting fate with a premature parade might have resulted in two heartbreaking and well-deserved losses. Fortunately, for them and for us, our pride and expectations didn't get ahead of the game itself, so everything is done in the right spirit when they celebrate their actual achievements with their Palm Sunday victory parade later today.

Of course, in terms of when or when not to celebrate a victory, timing makes all the difference. When is it premature and when is it

not? This raises for me an intriguing question about what might have been in the mind of Jesus when he orchestrated what appears to be a “victory” parade of some sort which history and religious tradition recognize as Palm Sunday.

I’ve been in ministry for over three decades and I have to admit, I’ve never thought much about Palm Sunday, other than to view it as a kickoff for Holy Week. Yet, some of you may have been more curious than I’ve been and might have wondered what this day was all about—why are we celebrating it? How does it fit in to the trajectory of this week? Is our parade of palms meant to recreate the excitement of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem as a messianic figure, or to proclaim the coming reign of God on earth, or is it more like a victory parade meant for the following Sunday, for Easter’s great surprise—celebrating in advance Jesus’ victory over the grave? Most of us figured it was one or more of those reasons, if we gave any thought at all for why we are festive on this particular day.

If those are the possibilities, then regardless of how we interpret or justify a Palm Sunday parade, does it not come across as a bit premature to celebrate a victory that hasn’t yet gone through the final test? Was it really a *fait accompli* for Jesus being embraced as the messianic figure for Israel, or that the realm of God was finally coming to earth, or that Jesus would rise again in such a manner it would confound and silence skeptics? I don’t think so.

So that makes me wonder, just what was the purpose of the procession on Palm Sunday if the options before us are contingent on things that have not yet been realized or proven to be true? Isn’t our faith tradition being just a bit presumptuous to assume Jesus was

orchestrating a celebration of his ultimate success as messiah before everything had played out? So, again, what could have been in Jesus' mind when he choreographed this grand entrance into Jerusalem?

Obviously, that's beyond the realm of our knowing. But from the view of the Gospel writer, Jesus was quite intentional in his preparations for that specific moment in time. More than one commentator has called Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, "choreographed street theatre"¹—intentionally orchestrated to parody imperial processions when Roman commanders entered the city or when Herod and his cohorts would visit. Yet, as it was described by Matthew, Jesus was also acting out the centuries old prophecy of Zechariah, who envisioned the arrival of the messianic royal king after the return of exiled Israelites from Babylon.²

Lo, your king comes to you;
Triumphant and victorious is he,
Humble and riding on a donkey,
On a colt, the foal of a donkey.
(Zechariah 9:9)

Yet, if Jesus was patterning his entrance on these examples, then either this procession was a bit premature and disingenuous (or at least it would make him seem presumptuous, if not foolish) or it was intended to make a prophetic statement to those who witnessed it. I have to believe it was the latter. In other words, Jesus didn't choreograph this to be a foreshadowing of when his messianic glory would come to pass; instead, he was proclaiming a reality that *couldn't come to pass* because of an overarching stubbornness, recalcitrance, and resistance among the leaders and most of Judean

¹ Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, Orbis, 2000, pg. 414.

² Many scholars believe that the last half of Zechariah (ch. 9-14) was written by followers of the prophet at a much later period, in all likelihood, during the period of the Greek occupation of Palestine.

society to address the underlying injustices of their own making and to do the things that would make for a lasting peace (cf. Luke 19:42).

Again, this Palm Sunday parade wasn't a kickoff to the Easter storyline or any forecast of messianic fulfillment. Jesus wasn't vainly attempting to declare victory before it occurred; he was driving home the point that Jerusalem was not yet ready for the type of messianic deliverance they yearned for or that prophets before him had imagined. Instead of generating excitement, Palm Sunday was meant to be a prophetic indictment! This becomes clearer when we parse out what was written in the scrolls of Zechariah.

As we know, much of the messianic imagery in Hebrew scripture was based on the mythic typecast of King David, whose battlefield successes were legendary. In many ways, this heroic warrior/king embodied the yearning of Israel itself throughout the centuries to stand up to continuous threats from large and aggressive empires that surrounded, if not occupied, it. The ancient tale of David defeating Goliath was not just a battlefield memory; it was equally symbolic of a deeply rooted desire for Israel to not succumb to greater powers that threatened them and defined their history, be they Philistines, Assyrians, Egyptians, Babylonians, Greeks, Seleucids, or Romans. These were the imperial "Goliaths" that threatened Israel repeatedly throughout its history.

As a lesser power fighting for survival, the dreams of divine redemption were of a great messianic freedom fighter who would successfully defeat, even against all odds, the enemies of Israel. In mythical heroic fashion, the Anointed One would possess extraordinary powers to inspire and rally his own people, possessing

the military skill and strategic instincts to outwit and defeat their enemies. In the messianic dream, their land and their people would be delivered from occupation and imperial domination. They would be free under the rule of a Davidic monarchy that would secure Israel forevermore. This myth still exists among some Israelis today.

Against this background, Zechariah's imagery was somewhat startling and perplexing: the divinely appointed and royal leader would come to Jerusalem, not riding on a steed like the commander of a great army, but instead, on a donkey—the animal commonly used for service. This was an image denoting humility—the Hebrew connotation being “poverty” and “affliction.” In other words, Zechariah developed the messianic imagery not along a warrior theme, but as a servant who emerged out of the humble circumstances of Israel's occupied state, among the poor and afflicted. This, of course, resonated with Isaiah's imagery of the Suffering Servant (Is. 53). The servant imagery wasn't new and unique; it simply wasn't popularly embraced.

There may have been a very good reason for why it wouldn't be widely embraced; Zechariah also prophesied that this royal king would *disarm* Israel, not prepare them for war or lead them into battle in their fight for freedom!

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
And the war horse from Jerusalem;
And the battle bow shall be cut off,
And he shall command peace to the nations...
(Zechariah 9:10)

This messiah-like figure would be counter-intuitive and an unnerving contrast to the popular warrior/king motif by promoting change

within Israel by demilitarizing her and ensuring the execution of justice and mercy as safeguards of their nation.

As Matthew made clear, Jesus choreographed this contrasting, counter-intuitive image of Christ deliberately—a choreographed Christ, as it were—theatrically demonstrating what it would take before Israel would find its true hope and identity as a nation. If the scales would ever fall from their eyes, the leaders would realize Jesus' proclamation *was* their “good news of salvation” and that their promised one would inspire and guide them to save themselves from their current path toward repeated self-destruction! A violent rebellion would never deliver them from occupation, but they would find freedom in a transformation of spirit to act differently in human relations with neighbor and enemy alike. Occupying forces would have no power over them if they were free in their spirits!

Since the leaders and population of Jerusalem of his time would not grasp Jesus' wisdom, he would enter that fateful week reminding them of what their prophets had already forewarned. The parade of palms was a stinging rebuke and reality check that Jerusalem wasn't yet ready to claim its ultimate deliverance or embrace its divinely anointed deliverer. From this seemingly innocuous street theater, it set the scene for why Jesus was crucified five days later as an enemy of the state.

It's interesting how relevant this message is in the course of human events and history. Governments and the social establishment are essentially *not-for-prophet* institutions of society. They love heroes and cultural myths that support their place and power, but they despise being ridiculed or challenged. Jerusalem

simply represents any human resistance to transformation—the unwillingness of people to recognize that they aren't ready to be delivered from the things that destroy them. Nor are they saved by the things they believe promise security and peace. Even the psalmist, who well could have been resident in King David's court, made this point evident a thousand years earlier:

A king is not saved by his great army;
A warrior is not delivered by his great strength.
The war horse is a vain hope for victory,
And by its great might it cannot save.

(Psalm 33:16, 17)

Israel could not save itself by might or power, but only by justice and doing what was morally right. The Christ parade in Jerusalem, choreographed by Jesus, was in effect, a protest against the established interests and resistance he met in his day, as it would still be true in ours.

After hearing Palestinian Christian peacemaker, pastor, and author, Mitri Raheb, speak here in this pulpit a couple of weeks ago, I'm pretty certain those with the power to sway the course of history still cannot grasp this Palm Sunday message. We remain burdened by an imperial world determined to use aggression and violence to control the land of the Bible and virtually everywhere else on this planet. The prophetic teachings of Jesus have only transformed a few cultures and I would say, that would not include our own. Oh, Christianity may have the largest number of religious adherents in the world with over two billion people, but that has not necessarily advanced the aspirations of the reign of God. It might even lead a skeptic to conclude that, ultimately, Christianity has been a failure in terms of transforming the world as Jesus sought.

Maybe that's why the festive spirit that day never was meant to proclaim a victory. Instead, as Jesus planned, it was meant to be a prophetic call to action. As Mitri himself writes,

With this recognition there came an understanding that the coming of the Messiah in Jesus had itself brought a pivotal change. Christians need no longer wait for direct divine intervention, because the intervention has already taken place. The Messiah has come, and there is no need to wait for another. God has done his part. The ball was now in the court of humankind. Either we could choose to play the game or to walk away. Further waiting was a waste of time. The transformed faithful were to engage the world, to challenge the monopoly of power, and to live the life of an already liberated people. This was a remarkable sea-change in the prevailing culture of the Middle East. The belief in Jesus as the yearned-for-Messiah replaced the idea of divine intervention with direct intervention of the faithful. It was now those who believed in Christ who had to step into this world to engage and to bring change to the empire.³

Interesting choice of terms on a day like this implying Jesus was a game-changer! And I suppose it follows that we are then the players, who take instruction from our coach and challenge the conventional thinking of this world with something quite extraordinary, i.e., a conviction that the power of love, the commitment to justice and nonviolence, the expression of mercy, compassion, peacemaking, forgiveness, reconciliation, and all the other values that, when applied, actually do transform places of conflict, do heal wounded hearts and relationships of harm, and do interrupt the cycles of violence that bring to an end centuries of hatred. This was Jesus' mission; it was his game plan. It is such a powerful paradigm that even death could not defeat it in people, nor would it let fear re-arm them. For those who truly believe in it will earnestly seek to resist the temptation to be less than they can be by giving up on the dream long before the game of life is over.

³ Mitri Raheb, *Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible Through Palestinian Eyes*, 2014, pp. 95-96.

This is the very hope we engage each week when we explore the teachings of our faith and we affirm on a day like this when we wave our palm branches and sing “hosanna” to God. The palm branches we wave are signs of prophetic resistance! We hail not our premature victories or conventional thinking, but rather the ongoing commitment to transform society and the values that oppress this world into those that will actually help heal and redeem it. That is how one defines success, appealing to the best within human beings and allowing God’s Spirit to transform our hearts toward that which is just and good. Though at times that may seem like a very long road to travel, it is the path that ultimately aligns itself with the will of God and the best interests of human civilization. That is why we must never give up until the season is finally over.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
13 April 2014