

Some Kind of King

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The Sixth Sunday in Lent
Palm Sunday
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“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” – Luke 19:38a

Some churches today will be worshiping according to the Liturgy of the Palms, as we are. Other churches will be worshiping according to the Liturgy of the Passion, as we will this coming Thursday. In many churches, they will be worshiping according to the Liturgy of the Kids, which is how the Sunday before Easter has been observed for generations.

It's hard for many of us to imagine Palm Sunday without children waving palm branches, parading up the center aisle and down the side aisles, round and round, while the rest of us sing John Mason Neale's hymn, “All Glory, Laud, and Honor,” as we did this morning, with its opening lines

All glory, laud, and honor,
To Thee, Redeemer, King.
To whom the lips of children
Made sweet Hosannas ring.

The problem is, there's not a word about children anywhere in any of the four accounts of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. All the evangelists mention crowds, so St. Theodulf of Orléans imagined that those crowds included children when he wrote this poem in the year 820, and which Neale translated into English about a thousand years later. And we've been singing about those children and their sweet hosannas ever since.

Imagination, according to Rowan Williams and Marilyn Robinson, who recently discussed this topic at Wheaton College, isn't so much about making things up as it is about discovering what's there, but only faintly or only in part.

“The experience of writing a poem,” Williams said, “is very often the sense that you half hear something and you know you've got to work at it, and you know you've got to let it unfold, and you don't quite know where it's going and sometimes where you thought it was going is absolutely not where it ends up. All of that makes me think that the imagination really is a faculty in us which uncovers something.” (CC 3/25/19)

Today, like so many days in the Christian calendar, requires imagination, that working at it, that letting the story unfold in a way that doesn't determine where it's going to go even though we think we know how the story ends.

But we don't. Jesus' story didn't end on Good Friday. That's our bare cross. That's our central message. That unfinished story of Jesus the Christ is what gave birth to Christianity. The Christian story is underway; it's not finished. When it comes to Jesus the Christ, we have to say to the world, Please stay tuned. That's one of the few things that Christians across the theological spectrum can agree on: God is not done with creation, and the Christ has a decisive role to play in that unfinished business.

“Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” We say those words, with Christians around the world and through the ages, every time we celebrate communion, which is why I include them as part of our liturgy. I want you to remember that our story has a future as well as a past. Christ will come again; our story is not finished. Imagine that.

The novelist Graham Greene described the Nazi hatred for the Jewish people as a “failure of imagination,” and one of my teachers liked to say that the failures of Christianity are not so much our failures in love or courage as failures in imagination. We fail to imagine what life is like for others – other people, other periods of history, other creatures, other ways of being – and so we blunder our way through life oblivious of the harm we're doing while considering ourselves innocent.

We're not innocent; we're complicit, which is what lies at the heart of that often misunderstood doctrine of original sin that so many in the church today find distasteful. The church's theologians are often smarter than they're given credit for because they dig deeper into reality than most of us do, and they discover things there that go mostly unnoticed, willfully or unconsciously, by the rest of us.

And our complicity in the world's suffering is one of those things. You and I are part of the problem. Every time we sit down to a nice steak dinner while others starve; every time we start up the car and belch fumes into the atmosphere; every time we pay our taxes to keep our military-industrial complex humming while weapons fuel the violence we pray to end – we are complicit, you and I. We are part of that anthropogenic system that we call business as usual, we've always been part of some version of it, and we're always going to be. That's original sin – it originates in us because of us -- because of our unwillingness to imagine a different world, and what we would need to change to make that world less imaginative and more real.

But that's the wrong way of putting it. The church has always taught that that world – the world Jesus called the realm of God – is already more real than the partial world that we have inherited from our ancestors and are in the process of passing on to our descendants. That world that Jesus called the realm of God, that he insisted is quite livable here in this world if we're willing to make some serious, systemic as well as personal changes – that world has been there all along and we're the ones who've arrived late to the party.

“In the beginning was the Word,” John famously wrote at the start of his version of the good news of Jesus the Christ, and that Word was with God and it was God. And it became incarnate. Lived here, lived on earth, like us, except that it was full of grace and truth and we're not. We're partially full of grace and truth and it requires imagination to see what it would be like to live full lives and not partial lives when it comes to grace and truth. And love and mercy and justice and peace.

Elizabeth asked us last Wednesday to pray with the arts, and the arts require us to use our imaginations. We have to consider possibilities. We have to explore the nooks and crannies of our thoughts and our feelings and our perceptions. As Mary Oliver said, we have to pay attention. And that's what she did to produce her poems: she paid attention. She paid attention to the world outside of her to allow it to shape and inform the world inside of her that we commonly call her imagination.

The arts help us do that. The arts help us see the world through someone else's experience. It might be a visual experience, an auditory experience, a tactile experience, a spiritual experience, or some other experience that draws our physical or spiritual senses away from ourselves and toward something else. The arts help us enter another world, if only for a time.

Today is the final Sunday in Lent and the final sermon in this series on prayer. Palm Sunday is an entirely appropriate place to conclude our series because so much of what we do in church requires us to pray with our imaginations. We pray to be better followers of Jesus, forgetting that his primary

mode of teaching was telling little stories that we call parables. A man had two sons. A woman lost a coin and lit a lamp and swept her floor. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed.

If we want to follow Jesus we have to follow those story lines that lead us to repentance and forgiveness and diligence and discernment and perseverance and mercy and justice and peace. Those little stories of Jesus establish trajectories that lead us through those great realities enfolded in first-century Palestine and to the ways those realities may or may not be enfolded in our own lives. Parables invite us in – to the house where the feast is being celebrated, the darkened corner where the precious coin is found, and the tree where the birds rest. Parables are all about imagination – Jesus' and ours.

Some of you may wonder why we don't have a pastoral prayer on Sunday mornings as many other churches do, and the answer can be given in one word: imagination. When I come down into the center aisle and bid you to pray, I am asking you to do your own praying; I'm not doing your praying for you, as a pastoral prayer does. I bid your prayers for the sick and injured and recovering – and then I pause while you call to mind those whom you know or who have heard about who are sick, injured, or recovering. Like Pat, for instance, who is recovering from surgery, or Betty, who's recovering from a respiratory infection.

When I bid your prayers for those who practice the arts of healing, I wait for you to call to mind and to hold in your heart people like Amy Brunkus or Donna Nedrow or Stephen Rudolph or Chad and Kate Fortun.

When I ask you to pray for people caught in places of violence, and then I mention places like Syria or Afghanistan or Israel or Palestine – or perhaps the house next door – I am asking you to use your imaginations to enter into their world, however briefly, and to offer that world to God in prayer, knowing that you are part of that world, with the luxury to pray for it, and thus in a position to do something about it, because, for a Christian, prayer is the first step in taking action.

And that's why, in a few minutes, we'll begin our regular congregational spring meeting with a call to order and a prayer. In praying at the start of our meeting we're not asking God to bless whatever decisions we make; we're asking God to help us make good decisions. We're asking God to enlighten the eyes of our hearts, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, so that our deliberations and decisions are broad rather than narrow, inclusive rather than exclusive, and graceful rather than fearful. Sometimes that means changing some things we've been doing. Sometimes it means leaving things alone. We don't always know until we get into the subject and look at it from different perspectives. We have to pay attention to the details, and then we have to step back and take a moment. We have to ponder. We have to use our imaginations.

And so we return to where we began, with palm branches and children and sweet hosannas. It was street theater on that first Palm Sunday, scripted and directed by Jesus, although none of the evangelists tell us that it was on the first day of the week when Jesus entered Jerusalem. It could have been the first Palm Wednesday. We don't know that Jesus was in Jerusalem only for a week before he was arrested; today could have been the start of Holy Month rather than Holy Week. We don't know what else Jesus might have done during those days in Jerusalem other than the relatively few events the evangelists record for us.

What we do know is that the people hailed him as their king – some kind of king – who arrived bearing God's name: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" Kings throughout history have claimed some connection to the divine, but this one, we believe, delivered the goods – precisely because he wasn't like other kings. He didn't build highways or aqueducts. He didn't field

armies or organize bureaucracies. He didn't establish libraries or academies.

He came bearing God's name because of what he had taught, what he had done, and how he had lived. He would have followers, of course – about 2.2 billion of us at last count – but he didn't call them subjects or servants; he called them his sisters and brothers. No king has ever done that. No king has ever renounced power for the sake of relationship. It's hard to imagine how a king might do that and wield authority.

But Jesus did. Imagine that.