

Two Parades – based on Luke 19:28-40
Aspen Community United Methodist Church
March 28, 2010
Palm and Passion Sunday

Page 1 of 8

The two parades into the city of Jerusalem celebrating the beginning of Passover illustrate the tension between "faith" and "empire." It is the tension between what we as citizens of any empire want from government, and what we want from our religious faith. Empire and Heart inform one another, but they cannot substitute for one another. This story is portrayed each Palm Sunday.

There were two parades that day.

On that spring day in the year 30 - two processions entered Jerusalem.¹

It was the beginning of the week of Passover -

a very sacred week of the Jewish year.

Since that time Christians have called this day Palm Sunday.

It's the beginning of the most sacred week of the Christian year.



Two parades:

One was a peasant procession and the other was an imperial procession.

Jesus rode a colt down the Mount of Olives - cheered by his followers.

Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth.

His followers were from these same working classes too - for the most part.

He was really a no-body to most people.

But - he was an amazing teacher. He was a healer. He was a prophet.

People flocked to hear him – flocked to be near him –

flocked to experience his healing - even over illness – and death itself.

People thought he might be the messiah for whom they were waiting.

Some were convinced.



On the opposite side of the city from the west – Pontius Pilate -

the governor's representative in Judea -

entered Jerusalem leading the imperial cavalry and its soldiers.



If Jesus procession was proclaiming the kingdom of God -

Pilate's procession was proclaiming the power of the Roman Empire.

Two Parades – based on Luke 19:28-40
Aspen Community United Methodist Church
March 28, 2010
Palm and Passion Sunday

Page 2 of 8

Pilate's procession was a demonstration of imperial power
and imperial theology.



Everyone was familiar with this procession.
The Roman governors of Judea or their representatives
were always there for the major Jewish festivals.
They were there in case there was trouble.

Pilate's troops were there to reinforce the Roman garrison
that overlooked the Jewish temple and its courts.

See it now:

Calvary on horses – foot soldiers – leather armor –
helmets – weapons – banners - golden eagles mounted on poles –
sun glistening on metal and gold.

Hear the sounds:

the marching of feet – the creaking of leather –
clinking of bridles – beating of drums - swirling dust - silent onlookers.

Yes, there was also a theology to this procession.

Caesar - was not simply the ruler of Rome.
Caesar was the considered the "son of God".

The big procession embodied a rival social order - and a rival God?

Jesus' procession embodied an alternative vision.

Two Parades – based on Luke 19:28-40
Aspen Community United Methodist Church
March 28, 2010
Palm and Passion Sunday

Page 3 of 8

And that is what makes up our gospels – all of them – that story
and all the images that go with it - that tell us about the God Jesus knew
who is close to our hearts and speaks in whispers -
and who sees a different order to things –
a different vision of peace and of justice and health and wholeness -
that he told us about in parables.

Jesus' procession embodied the way
we have learned to explore who and what God is.

The little procession deliberately countered what was happening
on the other side of the city.



Two kingdoms – two processions

Let's call the procession of almighty Rome – *Empire*.

What to call the other procession –
the little one with Jesus and his followers?

We could call it God.

We could call it faith.

Let's call it *Heart*.

Heart represents the best
of the work of faith and the tradition of Jesus.

Heart and Empire



They are still with us – these two processions.
They interact all the time. We need them both.

Two Parades – based on Luke 19:28-40
Aspen Community United Methodist Church
March 28, 2010
Palm and Passion Sunday

Page 4 of 8

We move between our needs for *Empire* and our needs for *Heart*.

Sometimes we need that display of power for national security.

Sometimes we need its borders.

Sometimes we need its protection of freedom.

Sometimes we need its infrastructure to bring services to us all.

Heart is made up of our religious and spiritual traditions –
their efforts for social justice – sometimes good and sometimes lacking -
and for instilling in people
that we are more than what you see on the surface.

Heart is the search for a new kind of peace in the world.

Heart is the search for God.

We need both.

Sometimes we are caught between –
because *Empire* cannot give completeness to our lives.

And *Heart* often cannot give infrastructure.



Heart is one of the things for which freedom exists –
and empire protects it -
the freedom to believe and worship -
and live our lives within the context of what? - of divine grace.

We talked about that divine grace
on Thursday night in United Methodism 101.

Our Wesleyan hymns sing of that grace –
what the people at the bottom of the social ladder
needed to hear – in the early 1700's – in England and beyond.

You might say they were in the same place within *Empire*
as the Jewish peasants were who followed Jesus.



Empire and *Heart* – are like two processions in our lives.

Let's look at one way we can experience them in our lives this past week.

Let's look at health insurance – just to get you thinking.



The reason to get you thinking is that
as responsible United Methodists – in the very traditions of John Wesley -
we want to dig deeply and learn from history and current affairs.
Remember the four ways we Methodists make decisions about theology:

Scripture – Tradition – Experience – and Reason

This would be the Methodist way.



The work of freedom has its clarion call – from the *heart*.

It does not come from *Empire*.

Empire – meaning the citizenry – the government – at whatever level -
by its nature – moves at a snail's pace.

And it really has no *Heart*.

We don't even ask that of it.

For the really important things – government needs tempering from the *heart*.

Government needs the tension of healthy religion –
the tension of those who are always looking
for the footprints of an illusive creator - the lure of the divine.



The path Jesus walked was an important one – the path of *Heart*.

Two Parades – based on Luke 19:28-40
Aspen Community United Methodist Church
March 28, 2010
Palm and Passion Sunday

Page 6 of 8

We never want to find cover in empire –
Ways to excuse ourselves from the work of healing -
the work of justice - the work of love –
that is integral to the work of *Heart*.
Let's think about health insurance.



Because of great advances in technology –
which include diagnosing and treating many illnesses –
the whole business has become a very expensive activity.

In fact – it is so outrageously expensive
that a few procedures can cost as much
as many of us make in a year – or more.

Health insurance became a benefit after the World War II and something
we slowly got accustomed to as part of employment.

It was a terrific way for large employers
to offer incentives to employees to remain with them.
My parents wanted me to graduate from college and get a job
with a company that would provide those benefits.

And then health insurance grew into a monster. We all know that.

As the monster grew bigger and more complex –
we needed *Empire* to try and regulate it.

That was not even enough.

Finally – through the democratic process and advocacy
through our legislators - we have effectively said to *Empire*
"Take it and see what you can do."

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Aspen Community United Methodist Church
March 28, 2010
Palm and Passion Sunday

Page 7 of 8

That was about a week ago.

Now – most of us are either relieved – or anxious - or angry –
or haven't a clue how we should feel.

Have I left anyone out?



My point in mentioning it today – is that here we are again considering what
is best for *Empire* and what is best for *Heart*.

Some of those things to which *Heart*
(this whole endeavor of faith and outreach)
has historically contributed in important ways -
have now been handed over to a great extent – to *Empire*.

There is a long history of caring for health - for us from John Wesley's publication
of that small book called *Primitive Physick* on how to treat different conditions -
to the founding of hospitals and educational institutions by Methodists and others.

Business and commerce
are now a big part of health insurance and the treatment of illness.
It all became too big and seemingly impossible to understand or manage.

And - that's why it has been handed off to *Empire*.

And *Empire* will be very overwhelmed.

I don't know whether it was a well thought out action or not.
I am not sure how it could have been given the thousands of pages
legislators needed to read.

But surely there is hope.

The tensions of *Empire* and *Heart* are very much alive.



Two Parades – based on Luke 19:28-40
Aspen Community United Methodist Church
March 28, 2010
Palm and Passion Sunday

Page 8 of 8

The meaning for me is in the tension between *Empire* and *Heart* –
And how it helps me think about
what I expect of the governments around me to do
and the things this tradition of Jesus has given me that I value.

The *Heart* things are to do unto others as I would have them do unto me.
The *Heart* things are to care for the sick – provide shelter and clothing -
as they are basic to life and well-being - when called on.

The *Heart* things are to love one another
and always to ask about the condition of my brother -
and take it seriously.



Now this is the main point:

If that smaller procession had not made its way
into Jerusalem that day -
with success enough that they lived to tell the story -
I am not sure how much we would still have
that *Heart* tries to teach
and *Heart* tries to live.

But - we do – and we will tell the story again next year.
And we will see how it intersects with our lives then.

May this Holy Week be a meaningful time for you and the people important to you.
Come back next week.

¹ Adapted from Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in *The Last Week: A Day by Day Account of Jesus' Last Week in Jerusalem*. 2006. p. 2