

The Arrival of the Revolutionary

John 12:12-19

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Today is Palm Sunday--the day when hope rode into town. Revolutionary Hope. Maybe, more hope than you want. **** It was Passover, which was such an important event, we can be sure all the rulers were in Jerusalem. It was the custom for the people to go out to the gates of the city to greet their arrival, and was certainly the custom of the rulers to make an entrance.

King Herod usually stayed away from Jerusalem, but he had to be in town for the festivities. We know he was quite wealthy, so you can imagine the entourage that accompanied his arrival. All the king's riches paraded by.

Pilate, the Roman governor, preferred to stay on the coast in Caesarea, but he also had to be in Jerusalem for the celebration. This was particularly important since Passover was an event that celebrated the liberation of the Hebrews from the oppression of Pharaoh. Pilate knew the zealots would again use this moment to protest the oppression of Caesar. Pilate hated zealots. So he rode into town demonstrating who was in control. The Roman procession was always so dramatic. The great golden statue of an eagle led the way. It was followed by the pennants and battle flags of Rome. Then came the trumpeters, soldiers, cavalry, and the terrifying chariots. Usually, at the end of this parade, there would be a group of prisoners in chains. Maybe Pilate dragged behind him a few zealots left over from last year's protest.

I grew up near New York City where parades were only meant to entertain people. I still remember being a child standing on the sidewalk, watching huge inflated animals bob down the street. By contrast, Washington, D.C. is known more for its demonstrations. When people take to the streets here, they are not trying to entertain anyone. They are trying to make a statement.

Ancient parades were more like the Washington variety. They had a purpose and made a statement. When Herod and Pilate arrived into town, one with the symbols of wealth and the other with the symbols of power, they were saying, this is why we are in charge. We are holding what is important. About that at least, they were right. They were holding something very important.

As I have watched the protests and demonstrations in our town this week, I was struck by the reminder that both those who run the World Bank and IMF, as well as those who are protesting it, agree that money is very important. They have different, sincerely held convictions for how to use it. But they agree that money is critical to the future of the world. Even Jesus would agree with them. He talked about money and power all the time, called his followers to be good stewards of it, and believed it was so important that it ought to be shared. So let us avoid any pietistic reassurances in church that we don't care about money and power. You ought to care about it! We may argue with each other about how best to use it, but please save the poor from any religious dribble about it being unimportant. As the Washington Post reminded us this week, as many as 16 million Africans are at risk for starvation. Don't tell them money and power are unimportant! That has always been the favorite line of the wealthy. Since they have convinced themselves money is unimportant, it doesn't matter if they hoard it. Jesus is clear about this: things like money and power are important to the future of the world. The only question is how do we use what we have for a world of good? If you count on it to save your own life, it will destroy you and the world. If you use it for things that make a difference in the world, then you will find your life.

Herod and Pilate were both addicted to collecting all the money and power they could get. Herod was a puppet king of Caesar. And Pilate, was Caesar's political appointee, which meant that they were both beholding to someone else for all that they had. All their decisions and energies were spent trying to get a little bit more wealth and power.

As they parade by, Herod and Pilate tell us to get all of this that we can. Strive to get more. Strive to make your own dreams come true. Strive to make life more comfortable. Strive to protect yourself from an unknown future. Strive, strive, strive. But it is never going to be enough. Wealth and power when hoarded are narcotics. The more you have, the more you crave, and everyday you spend in fear of not having enough.

For all their striving, in the end, how do we remember Herod and Pilate? As the crucifiers of the world's real hope. They killed the man who warned us, "One day your soul will be required of you. And these things you have collected, whose will they be?"

There are so many bills, so many reasons to be afraid you will not have enough, so many uncertainties about the future. How do we get over the fear that makes us addicted to power and wealth?

Well, one year in Jerusalem, there was a third parade. Jesus of Nazareth, who had been rumored to have performed some pretty amazing miracles, had just raised Lazarus from the dead. John, in his gospel, makes a point of saying that a crowd of people showed up to meet Jesus when he arrived into town, because they had seen and heard about what he did with Lazarus.

Here was a man who could raise the dead! This is what completely frees us from the addiction to wealth and power. The reason we strive for these things is we think that with them we can prevent the loss of our dreams, health, relationships, jobs, and all the things that make up a life. But the message of Jesus Christ is that the way you get over your fear of losing your life is not by collecting more money and power, but by going ahead and dying to this life. Die to having the life you expected. Only then will you be able to receive life as a grace. I know, I have mentioned this thing about grace once or twice before. Some have wondered if I do not need to speak more about sin as well as grace. But the thing that prevents us from receiving grace is not our sins, but our insistence on achieving life on our own. The Pharisees were great at avoiding sin...but they had already determined to kill Jesus and Lazarus, again, because Jesus viewed their self-righteousness as one thing to collect like power and wealth. Thinking that we have cleaned up our lives and are now avoiding sin is just one more way to delude ourselves that we have secured the future.

Cheap grace, according to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is grace that does not bid you to die. Costly grace asks for everything: your money, power, dreams, family. Everything, and especially your ability to be moral and religious. Give it all up. Give it to Jesus so that you can discover a whole new life, that is finally free to use everything you are holding for stewardship. Otherwise you are going to waste life worrying if you will lose things that you certainly will lose. Trust me on this: one hundred percent of all people eventually lose their jobs. One hundred percent lose their marriages. One hundred percent lose their loved ones, their health, and their lives. One hundred percent of our bodies will eventually return to dust. You are not going to beat those odds, no matter how much wealth, power, or righteousness you collect. Whatever it is that you are afraid of losing, you will lose. So why do you want to waste your fleeting days worrying about when it will happen? Get it over with! Choose today to die with Christ, that you may spend the rest of life receiving his sacred mystery day after day.

John tells us that when Jesus heard about the plot on his life, he went to the wilderness with his disciples where he was safe. Everyone wondered if he would dare to come to Jerusalem for the Passover since there was a warrant out for his arrest. So on Palm Sunday when he arrived at the gates of the town, it was as a fugitive revolutionary. The crowds knew this, and when they saw him, they began to shout out, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel!"

Realizing that the crowd did not understand that he was not Herod or Pilate, according to John, it was then that Jesus grabbed a donkey to ride into town. John even tells us it was a young donkey. A little donkey. What kind of conquering king rides into town on a little donkey? One who is free. He is free from the addictions to power and wealth, and he is free even from the expectations of the crowd.

There is nothing more addictive than the crowd. Every day you face a crowd of expectations. There is a crowd at work, at school, and maybe even in the church. The crowd tells you that they need you, that they are counting on you, that it is up to you to give them what they want. They will be so happy with you, if you just do what they want. We have all fallen for that line time after time. So now, in addition to wealth, power, and self-righteousness, we can add popularity to our list of dangerous narcotics.

Jesus was free even from the people he came to serve. He had already died to every fear and rejection that the world uses to intimidate its leaders. And that is the reason he could save the world. Seeing this, the Pharisees said to each other, "See, you can do nothing. Look, the whole world has gone after him."

You cannot make a difference in an addicted world if you yourself are still addicted. But if you were to return tomorrow to your part of the world as one who was truly free in Christ, free from addiction and free from fear, you would be pretty distinctive. In fact, if you were free from fear, you would be revolutionary.

O God, by your Holy Spirit, so bind us into Christ who came to die with us, that we might live with him, as a people who are finally free to participate in the great revolution of your new kingdom. Amen.