

I. Intro.:

A. In our Year of the Bible, we've been moving forward chronologically through God's holy interpreted history, from creation now into the time of Jesus

1. In Lent we have taken a close-up look at what happened to Jesus & his disciples on Thursday, Thursday night and Friday of that last week before Jesus died...
2. so now we are, in effect, doing a flashback to 5 days earlier

B. In reality, we today are doing a flashback of about 2 thousand years ... but those people in that scene were doing their own flashback to scenes hundreds of years before that.

1. I've called this message "A Tale of Two Processions", but I might just as well have titled it "A Tale of Four Processions"
2. Two of those processions occurred in the year 30 AD, one of the processions happened in 142 BC, and the fourth one in 842 BC
3. You don't need to remember all these dates, but they will remind us that the whole "Jesus thing" was not isolated from other events in this long Heilsgeschichte

II. (Two Processions)

A. As I mentioned, in the spring of the year 30, there were 2 very different processions that entered the city of Jerusalem

1. On the west side of Jerusalem, arriving from the seaside city of Caesarea was a large and grand imperial Roman procession
 - a) Pontius Pilate is famous for passing the death sentence upon Jesus, as we heard last week. Pilate was the governor of three Roman provinces, in the area of Palestine, including Judea.

He normally lived in a palace in the pleasant port city of Caesarea, garrisoned there with a few thousand Roman soldiers

But whenever major Jewish feasts, such as the Passover, came around, it was a custom for the governor to travel up to Jerusalem to keep order during festival times. This was because the population in Jerusalem could suddenly triple with all the pilgrims coming to worship at the Temple

- b) Pilate was the official top representative of Rome in those parts, so when the Governor arrived, it was a big deal

2. Imagine this impressive scene:

- a) Cavalry on horses, hundreds of foot soldiers with leather armor, helmets and plenty of visible and ominous weapons
- b) Picture if you will, great banners furling in the wind, with golden eagles mounted on poles and a lot of gold and metal glinting in the sun, with Pilate himself astride a muscular white warhorse
- c) Then imagine the sounds: the marching feet of soldiers, the shouted commands, the trumpet fanfares, the beating of drums and the creaking of leather

3. It was a public spectacle designed to display imperial power and strike awe into the common people

- a) It was also meant to show forth imperial theology, for it wasn't just the power of the state on display.
- b) In a place where Caesar was considered the Son of God, the Emperor was often referred to with titles such as "Savior" and "Lord".
- c) The banners would have proclaimed Pilate as the local representative of the divine Emperor Tiberius.

Maybe in other parts of the empire that would have been acceptable, but in the capital city of the Jews, this represented flagrant idolatry.

Nevertheless, open resistance to Caesar as supreme lord would bring a stiff political price.

B. On that same day, entering Jerusalem from the east came a very different procession

1. It was led by a common rabbi and his peasant followers ...

- a) This rabbi rode not on a noble war horse, but on a simple donkey, with no soldiers & the leader of this procession carried no weapons
- b) This was a planned counterprocession, meant to reveal what kind of leader this Jesus was, and showing him in stark contrast to the military procession on the other side of Jerusalem

2. In Mark it doesn't exactly name Zechariah 9:9-10 but in Matthew it does, because the intention is clear that Jesus is the living fulfillment of this vision of a king who comes to Zion humble and mounted on a donkey

3. What kind of king was foretold in Zechariah 9:10?

- a) One who banishes war from the land and commands peace to the nations. No chariots, warhorses or bows with this king!

Text: Zech. 9:9-10; 2 Kgs. 9:1-13; 1 Macc. 13:49-51; Mark 11:1-11

(Palm Sunday) 3

- b) In stark contrast to Pilate's grand procession symbolizing all the outward glory and power of the Emperor, Jesus humbly entered the Jewish capital, thus representing the kingdom ... of God
- c) On Palm Sunday, we understand better the significance of Jesus processing into Jerusalem on a donkey when we put that alongside the contrasting procession that was also happening at that time.

C. This morning I want to draw our attention to 2 rather familiar aspects of the procession of Jesus ...

III. Let's look at 2 actions of that enthusiastic crowd:
actions that show how joining the Jesus parade can be more difficult than we think ...

A. We've called today "coat Sunday"

1. Laying down some extra coats of ours, and then giving them away to needy people is not only a kind gesture but it reminds us that some of the crowd lay down cloaks or garments in front of Jesus
2. So what's with that, anyway?
 - a) I've always wondered about that part of the story, but didn't pay much attention to it because the focus was always on the palm branches, and not on the garments ...
 - b) Well, in my study Bible this week, I found a new cross-reference about those cloaks, something that I'd never noticed before ...
 - c) It's a flashback to a 3rd procession story centuries before Jesus ... let's recreate that story, which those followers of Jesus might have remembered

B. From our timeline, you recall that after Solomon, the kingdom divided into Israel in the north, and Judah in the south

1. In the year 842 BC, Joram (grandson of Ahab) reigned as king in Israel, continuing the worship of foreign gods, as Ahab & Omri had done before him
 - a) To show God's displeasure with this family dynasty of apostasy, the prophet Elisha authorized another prophet to go to an army commander named Jehu and secretly anoint him king of Israel
 - b) Of course, this was treason against the current king
2. After Jehu's military peers and friends discovered there was a new king in their midst, listen to what happened next
 - a) If you want to join me in your Bibles, it's in 2 Kings 9:13. I had never noticed this part of the Jehu story before:

Text: Zech. 9:9-10; 2 Kgs. 9:1-13; 1 Macc. 13:49-51; Mark 11:1-11

(Palm Sunday) 4

b) Here was a triumphal entry of sorts for a real king of God's people! The similarities make it more than mere coincidence ...

c) But there are some differences if you consider this a precedent for Jesus' procession some 872 years later

1st of all, Jehu was in the northern kingdom, while Jesus' entry was in Jerusalem, which was the capital of the southern kingdom

2nd, Jehu was an extremely violent king

(a) To remove all traces of Baal worship (& any threats to his own throne), Jehu ordered the massacre of the whole royal family of Omri & their supporters

(b) Jesus, on the other hand, was sort of a non-violent total opposite of Jehu in how he exercised his kingship and how he dealt w/ opponents & enemies

3. So I have to wonder, "Did the crowd spreading cloaks see Jesus in the mold of a new King Jehu, a radical reformer coming in to 'clean house'?"

a) If Jesus saw this cloak linkage to the Jehu story, maybe he was not so flattered by it ...

b) Could it be that this detail of the story revealed how much the crowd still misunderstood his kingship?

c) After all, our view of the Heilsgeschichte today would say that both Omri & Jehu were flawed models to emulate ... Why?

First of all they made the same faulty assumptions that David & Solomon before them had made: putting up artificial "boxes" around God ...

(a) You can see those 2 squares on timeline during the united kingdom.

(b) The boxes symbolize putting a nationalistic fence around YHWH, and a geographical fence also.

Another reason not to put Jesus in the mold of King Jehu was the violence of Jehu:

(c) He & the kings before him had long rejected God's original Holy War designs. These kings claimed to use violence to accomplish God's purposes.

(d) It was only Jesus who finally restored God's original shalom vision for fighting evil.

4. So ... was laying down cloaks for Jesus the best way to honor him? I'm not so sure now. But cloaks weren't the only things laid down in Jesus' path.

IV. Today on "Palm Sunday" the use of palm branches is kind of obvious, isn't it?

A. Well, it's traditional, yes, but perhaps not as great a fit for Jesus' entry as I always thought ...

1. I must acknowledge that it's hard for us today to avoid reading the Gospel of John into this story in Mark:
2. Mark & Matthew describe the crowd waving "leafy branches", but only John specifically uses the word "palms", and Luke doesn't mention any branches at all.
3. It might be more accurate to call it "Branch Sunday" ...

B. In any case, if we assume from John that they were indeed palm branches, that action, too, may present some problems from Jewish history for how to understand Jesus

1. Here's where the tale of the 4th procession comes in, yet another flashback for the crowd who was there with Jesus:
 - a) Most of your Bibles don't have the Apocrypha, but if yours does, you can turn with me to the 13th chapter of 1 Maccabees
 - b) 700 years after the Jehu story, Simon Maccabeus was the high priest in Jerusalem. Simon was a brother of the Maccabean leaders Judas & Jonathan, who had led a successful Jewish revolt against the Seleucids

In 142 BC Simon negotiated a diplomatic solution king Demetrius II ... This made Judea semi-independent for a few years

When Simon & his liberators finally came to retake Jerusalem, this is how the scene was described in 1 Maccabees 13:51
2. Here the palm branches represent political victory and freedom from foreign enemies
 - a) With a great hero figure to thank in Simon, this story of the people's joyful entering Jerusalem with palm branches & singing ... this had to be in the minds of many of the crowd coming with Jesus
 - b) The Maccabean palm branch story was part of a glowing time in Jewish history: It was another "triumphal entry" that they would have loved to recreate if it meant being once again free from foreign oppressors
3. So just like the cloaks in Jesus' day pointed back to hailing the new king Jehu, 872 years earlier, could it be the palm branches show us a crowd welcoming Jesus as a new political liberator of Jerusalem, kind of like the Maccabean high priest Simon was welcomed 172 years earlier?

C. If so, the cloaks & palms represent for us much more than simply Jesus re-enacting some Old Testament scenes

1. I see these cloaks & palm branches as symbols of an enthusiastic people who misunderstand Jesus
2. The cloaks and palms may show us followers of Jesus who, unfortunately, follow him for the wrong reasons!

V. What are some of the implications of this?

A. Are you one of those energetic supporters of Jesus on the entry to Jerusalem, shouting your "Hosannas" and yet not actually in step with the kind of king he was?

1. It is possible to jump on the "Jesus bandwagon" and believe in a chummy friendly Jesus who calls you to love God & then lets you pretty much live your existing life, simply with a nicer "Jesus veneer" washed over it. Following Jesus in that procession doesn't require very much of you at all.
2. It's also possible to wave the Jesus flag in one hand and the American flag in the other, essentially equating the mission of both. I believe the crowd of the palms and cloaks is not so different from enthusiastic Xians today who are willing, in the name of Jesus, to defend themselves with swords & assault rifles that Jesus himself told his followers to put down!

About 12 years ago I surprised Janette & took her to a concert of a famous country music star who also sings Christian tunes. I don't like the twangy kind of country music but it was an enjoyable concert with her, held at a very large church in Wichita. The only downer on the evening for me was one point when a couple of Boy Scouts paraded around the stage with a large American flag on a pole. What saddened me was not the flag itself, but how the appearance of this symbol of a nation and its military power immediately got louder whoops and cheers from the audience than the singer himself got, or even any reference he made to worshiping Jesus. At that moment, I felt like something else had eclipsed Jesus as Lord over that particular place.

B. I don't mean to stop all use of palm branches or coats on Palm Sunday in our contemporary churches

1. Having adults & children do these palm processions every year in church is valuable for several reasons:
 - a) It helps some of us simply learn the biblical story in the 1st place ... A re-enacted palm procession is how many of us 1st learned it!
 - b) It also reminds us & helps us re-enter the biblical story today in a concrete way

Text: Zech. 9:9-10; 2 Kgs. 9:1-13; 1 Macc. 13:49-51; Mark 11:1-11

(Palm Sunday) 7

c) 3rd, it's good for us to get out of our seats and praise Jesus with our arms & legs & bodies, not just with our minds and voices. Doing a processional is a very different experience from reading about one.

2. Nevertheless, the new things I discovered about spreading cloaks and palms, from OT & Apocryphal history, do make me think twice about just jumping in & waving a palm branch

a) "Am I actually betraying a misunderstanding of Jesus' mission when I wave that palm branch?"

b) "When I spread that coat for King Jesus, am I promoting a protective, militaristic Jesus, who wants me, my family & my country to be safe & successful, even if it means others are neglected, suffer or die to ensure that outcome?"

VI. Conclusion

A. You can decide those questions for yourself

B. For me, it won't stop me altogether from taking part in palm processions, but it will prompt challenging questions for myself & for you: "What am I communicating with this re-enactment? What kind of king is the Jesus I'm supporting?"

1. Today On this "Branch Sunday" or "Coat Sunday", I invite us to ask ourselves the same things ...

2. If we're brave enough to join in Jesus' alternative procession, then let's pray for him to reveal himself this week to us for the radical, peace-loving yet disturbing king that he was ...

C. May we slowly turn from our domesticated, self-serving versions of Jesus, to the suffering one who still wants our allegiance