

I LOVE A PARADE

A Sermon by the Rev. Janet L. Abel
Preached on Palm Sunday, March 29, 2015

The Point Is the Parade

It's kind of anticlimactic when Jesus actually goes into Jerusalem, kind of like a tourist. He just looks around and then goes to Bethany. Doesn't stay long that first day in Jerusalem, does he? There's a parade. Passover is at hand.

I do love parades. How many of you can say honestly that you love parades? A lot of us, right? They're very exciting, and I come from a long line of parade lovers. My dad loved them, and I would frequently get dragged to these events. Memorial Day would come and my family didn't want to go, but I'd get up and go with dad to the Memorial Day parade in town.

We also went to West Point football games in the fall. Have any of you ever been to a West Point football game? Not many. It's kind of far, I know. Before the game, half the class parades, and you can go and watch that if you wish. Or you can have a tailgating party and then go to the game.

West Point Is Beautiful, but It's Purpose Has Always Bothered Me

But we always went to the parade first, even though it was up a hill and at the opposite end of the campus from the stadium. When you were with my dad, though, you did not miss the parading of the cadets prior to the football game. That was the point of it.

I am not completely antiwar, but I hate it as I think we all do, anxious as we are to get our troops out of Afghanistan. War is always tragic, but sometimes it seems necessary. West Point is geared to the education of officers, a beautiful place that trains young men and women to do the most difficult things they must face in their young lives – to defeat the enemy and sometimes to take the lives of other young men and women.

At any rate, I do love parades, and Memorial Day is just one of the reasons. Art pointed out the difference in his children's sermon, and I will get to that.

Once, When Still in Seminary, I Went To Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade

There are, of course, military parades, and many parades celebrate our nation's history. But there are lots of other parades for lots of other reasons, and many of them are for cheerful and heartwarming occasions like Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. That's a big event, quite a happening, isn't it? Have any of you ever been to that parade? I see a lot of hands, and there are a lot of people there. You have to get there pretty early if you want a good place to stand, and it's very cold at that time of year.

Two friends went with me, one from California and the other from Florida. I can tell you they weren't prepared for how cold

it is in New York City on Thanksgiving Day. New York is like a huge wind tunnel, with great winds swooping along the avenues. Certain avenues are fine, and then you turn the corner, and the crosstown winds will get you if there are no buildings blocking their path. It's unbelievably cold.

Wouldn't you know, we found a front-row place to stand for Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, right where there are no buildings. We froze. We tried our best to keep warm with hot chocolate and other things, but my two friends got very sick, being from much warmer climes, but we did get to see the parade and saw Bob Hope to boot. It was one of the biggest attractions of the day.

St. Patrick's Day called for enormous parades in the city. I got to go once, and the only reason I saw anything is that I climbed on top of a mailbox and managed to get my head above most of the other heads in the crowd. Unbelievable! The crowds were ten-fifteen people deep. You couldn't see anything.

Binghamton Is Twice Odd & Quirky Too

And here in Binghamton, we have our St. Patrick's parade well before St. Patrick's day itself, don't we? That's the very first thing I found out about Binghamton. I was living in Houston, Texas, as a chaplain in training at the Texas Medical Center. I met a nun while there and told her I had been called to take a job at Northminster Presbyterian Church.

She replied, "Oh, Binghamton. I actually lived there for a while. Rod Serling comes from there." I said, "Oh, that's interesting.

He's a little odd, don't you think?" The nun answered, "He's from there, and they have an early St. Patrick's Day parade." My response was, "That's kind of odd too."

I found Binghamton intriguing from the first, but it's a good thing. Bands in the area come to practice with us, and it's a great way for some of them to "tune up" their performances in our advanced St. Patrick's parade schedule prior to their reappearances in the actual St. Patrick's Day parades in other towns. Our quirky parade has become a big deal, and we in this church participate by working in our "Hospitality Tent." It may be work, but we have a good time doing it.

Parades Are Public Events, Perhaps the Ultimate in Public Events

There are crowds of people and dancers and floats and banners and old cars and fire engines and so forth. With all those people and vehicles moving along the street, it has to be closed for the event. So along with the police and maintenance workers of the city, everybody gets involved.

It's not business as usual during a parade. Traffic is stopped and rerouted. Pedestrians take over. And sometimes drivers become irritated by getting caught in parade traffic. Going is one thing and then sitting in your car not able to get across the street is another. It happens a lot in New York City.

I have been to the Halloween parade in Greenwich Village in Manhattan. Unbelievable, right? It took me three hours to park the car. Macy's was one thing, but Halloween, that was a sight. That's all I can

tell you. I saw many fun-filled things that day. We know that most parades are happy events held for holidays.

On the other hand, we find that some parades have controversial overtones. The Columbus Day parade has become a bit controversial in our country because native Americans and others who worshipped the land and its animal inhabitants felt oppressed and did not understand the concept of “ownership” of the land and killing for sport brought to this land of freedom by the colonists, who came here and gobbled up the land and fenced it in.

Finally, finally, gay and lesbian groups got to march in the St. Patrick’s Day parades this year in Boston and New York. It’s taken many years to bring about this revolution in social values, to say nothing of the unfinished and continuing reformation in women’s rights, which has spurred many a parade and demonstration.

Those Good Friday Parades

There’s one in Endicott. Some might feel fine about that, and others might be put off by people parading with a cross to commemorate the Via Dolorosa. That’s what it’s called, the Way of Sorrows. It takes place in Jerusalem too, every year at this time, remembering the Way to Golgatha, the Place of the Skull, the Crucifixion.

I’ve told you this story, but when I was a child, I had a friend named Lana Franks, whose father built us a cross. We commemorated Good Friday over and over after watching *King of Kings*, starring hand-some Jeffrey Hunter. Little girls like us liked him

as Jesus, with blue eyes and sort of blond hair. We would reenact the crucifixion scene, and all our neighbors would watch, smiling at us as we went up and down the street with our big cross.

There were some other parades of much less respectability, not such great parades but parades of the past, mostly. Parades of the Ku Klux Klan. Parades of Ireland by the Orange and then the Green trying to stir things up. Parades often turn into violent demonstrations.

I was a witness, when I still lived in New York City, to the procession of an extreme Jewish sect that decided to block all the doorways into Macy’s during the height of the Christmas season. It was the weekend before Christmas, and I remember watching this from across the street and decided to get out of there. The police were called. People started to push and shove. It was beginning to turn into something else. The cheers were turning into yells.

The Ultimate Parades – Ticker-Tape, But There’s no More Ticker Tape Now

You know I’m a former banker, and maybe I’ve mentioned to you that I got to participate in some ticker-tape parades. Famous parades that New York City holds. And I should have looked this up. I’m not sure when the first ticker-tape parade was held.

It probably had to do with the Yankees, don’t you think, Red Sox fans? They’ve won many of the World Series, and the Mets have too. Actually, as Art and I remember it, in 1969 there was an occasion to throw

paper out the window and fête the Mets as well as the astronauts.

There have been many parades down Broadway through the Wall Street area, and New York decides to do this on special occasions. They used to use ticker tape, and we theorize that maybe this was a way to get rid of all that paper that Wall Street generates.

Bombing Broadway with Shredded Paper

Nowadays, they don't use ticker tape at all, so you take all your paper, of which there's a lot, and you shred it. If your window is open, to this day you can still throw paper out the windows during these parades. But I worked in a building at 52 Broadway, and the windows didn't open in the new-fangled buildings. We had to go to the roof, and we were allowed to do that after shredding much paper. It was a day you got to goof off, so I actually walked down the street while the paper was raining down.

That was the day after the Bicentennial, July 5, 1976. There were tall sailing ships that came into the harbor, and the next day the city decided to hold a ticker-tape parade for all the sailors. I was there, a young girl, but I was there. And then as a banker, I threw some paper over the parapet of the roof on Nelson Mandela, which was a thrill. It was a short parade, but great to see him and Winnie during the height of the Freedom March in South Africa.

And then came Operation Welcome Home, which looked somewhat like the pictures Art showed you. Half the troops were there, with much of their equipment. And it took

almost half the day, at least six or seven hours. to parade all the troops and equipment, the tanks and the guns, and so we had to throw paper and more paper and a whole lot more paper. It was such a long parade that we ran out of paper.

It also felt like fun, but underneath it all, we were celebrating our troops. It was not a military victory. No way. It didn't feel as festive to me as many parades in which I had taken part. I didn't feel quite right about it, this parade of military might, when there was no crushing the opponent with our superior guns and weaponry.

At the end of the day, when they started to clean up, the piles of paper were equal in height to the street lights. They were so high because there was so much paper out there. It's been estimated that it costs millions of dollars to put on a ticker-tape parade. Half the police force in New York City are reassigned that day to be in Wall Street. Half of the city's maintenance workers were also on hand to help clean up after these parades.

We Remember Today Another Parade

It's a parade that took place every Passover, as a matter of fact, not just when Jesus was there but every Passover. There's a historian named Josephus, who has estimated that 2.7 million people went to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.

It was extremely important to the ancient Jewish people to be in Jerusalem; to be in the temple, the heart of the faith; to celebrate this festival of freedom, commemorating freedom from Egypt. Moses and Aaron led

the people out with Miriam singing. That's what they're remembering. It's the heart of Judaism, and that's what is commemorated every Passover.

The Angel of Death Passes over Egypt, Slaying the First-Born of Egyptians; Jews Were Saved by Lambs' Blood on Lintels

And the people are set free. Pharaoh finally gives in. And that seder, you remember, that last night in captivity when they roast the lamb and put the blood on the lintel. We remember, and this is what we're going to do as a church on Thursday night.

So every Passover, millions of people would process into Jerusalem waving palms and singing Psalm 118. That's why Pontius Pilate would move, being as he lived in Caesarea, but he would take half his forces and move into the Antonia Fortress, a big Roman barracks and stockade that was right next door to the temple.

The Romans would go and be there too because this Festival of Freedom in the midst of captivity, in the midst of being oppressed by the Romans resulted in higher tension and restlessness and rebellions among so many people.

So that one particular day, we remember that Jesus decides to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. He turns his face toward Jerusalem knowing that this is where the tensions will be very high. The result will be death for Jesus. The temple leaders, the people, the Romans, his followers, all coming into Jerusalem, and he decides to ride in on a donkey. We hear a lot about the donkey, don't we?

Jesus Sets Himself up for Trouble. Why?

The disciples are going to go into Jerusalem and see a donkey and take it, and someone's going to say, "Stop." Donkeys were lowly compared to horses, but not that lowly. They're like a car that the disciples just decided to borrow. Kind of like, if you're comparing a horse to a Cadillac and a donkey to a Toyota. That's fine, but it's still a very expensive mode of transport that the Disciples are just kind of borrowing.

There's another reason why Jesus wants to ride the donkey. It was all part of the plan. He needs to ride in on a donkey. It all works the way Jesus said. He gets that donkey, and he rides into Jerusalem on purpose.

You know the kings of old rode into cities when they conquered them, in a chariot pulled by two or three horses. That symbol of riding through those gates, those massive openings in those massive walls on chariots pulled by horses was a symbol of victory, military might, Operation Welcome Home.

But Jesus rides on a donkey. And so did kings before him and generals who were coming in peace. There were leaders who decided purposefully to ride on a donkey because that was the symbol for "We're just coming to visit you. You're one of us, but we're not conquering you. This is not a military victory." And so they rode on donkeys. Jesus purposefully rides in as a king, but a different kind of king who comes in peace.

We know those people who want a king, who want a new general, a new David, who's system is to "Throw those Romans

out, get rid of those taxes, get rid of these foreigners, and turn back to things as they were.”

What they get, of course, is a man, a simple man who is going to preach love and acceptance in the temple. So we know the people cheer. They cheered that day, but this would change very shortly.

This Parade Is a Very Public Act

And everybody gets stirred up. The people, the Romans, the Sanhedrin, the leaders in

the temple and Jerusalem. We know how the parade ends, but we know far more than those who were lining the streets in Jerusalem that day. We know that love wins despite hate, but the spite goes on in the here and now. That love will always win. That love is the greatest force there is.

Our king rides in on a donkey proclaiming peace, and so we wave our palm fronds, and we shout, “Hosanna!”

Amen.