

Palm Sunday 2014

Sermon 4.9.17

Scripture: Matthew 21:1-11

This is street theater—subversive, ironic performance art. Jesus has just staged a bit of political street theater, whose meaning is to be found in the ways that the scenario he enacts departs from the norms.

That's what *I* think anyway.

Think it through with me.

A king would enter the city over which he rules or means to rule—he would enter it in majesty and a show of might. Wearing purple robes maybe, and flanked by soldiers and chariots and perhaps some captured slaves, the king would literally be on a high horse, a stallion maybe, muscular and aggressive.

And the people would be impressed at the spectacle, a rare sight perhaps—for how often would the highest ruler of the land come through the likes of far-flung Jerusalem? Or maybe it would have been a common sight—if Herod the tetrarch who called himself a king paraded around Jerusalem like this, which he might have done given the power trip he seems to have been. Or maybe it would have been a frightening sight—if it were a foreign king who'd come to take over, whom you'd resist at your own peril, if you were to survive that long. The statue in Budapest's Heroes' Square depicting the "king" who invaded the land and settled the city back in the 8th century: he wasn't someone I'd have been excited to see coming.

And now that I think of it, this is just the sort of king who would come down from the Mount of Olives as Jesus is said to have done here. On the Mount of Olives, a foreign king would gather his troops and, looking down on the city, would devise a strategy for invading. But that would mean Jesus was invading this place, and the disciples were his gathered troops, and that doesn't seem quite right...

Or does it?

This would all have been conventional—a king parading through a city, either a city he rules or a city he would soon rule. As to however commonly experienced this would have been among regular people, I don't know. But the conventions, I imagine, would have been familiar even to those who'd never seen such a thing for themselves.

I've never watched the Academy Awards, but I know the conventions surrounding them.

I've never been to Times' Square on New Years Eve, but I'd know what to expect if I ever were to go.

A king entering a city: even the people who'd never seen it for themselves would have known how this goes; so, when it played out differently, people would have noticed, I'm guessing.

We hear the story straight. We hear this story as Jesus' "triumphal entry into Jerusalem." Most Bibles in English even entitle it so. Of course, the stories of the Bible originally had no titles, no headings that separated them out from the overall text. The fact that most English Bibles do have these titles is intended as helpful, and I think has that effect. But since imposed upon the text, they then unfortunately become linked to the text.

Consider: "The Good Samaritan" we know to be the story of the man who was attacked on the road to Jericho. It's a title that helps, but also obscures. I mean, I wouldn't say the point of that story is the Samaritan at all, but the traveler who allows his vulnerability in the world. He could have gone out better defended, or not gone out at all, just walled himself in—but instead he went out, entrusting himself to God-knows-what. "Go and do likewise," Jesus concludes that story.

Consider: "The Prodigal Son" we know to be the story of the younger brother who takes his fortune and sets out into the world. It's a title that helps, but also obscures. I mean, I wouldn't say the point of that story is the libertine younger brother but the forgiving and welcoming father. After all, that father could have told him, "I'm done with you. You've gone too far this time. You're dead to me." But he didn't. Instead, he welcomed him home, celebrated his homecoming!

"Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem" we know to be this story. But it's a title that obscures far more than it helps. After all, I don't think triumph is what's being acted out here. I think what we're seeing here is subversion, irony.

We hear the story as earnest because irony is what's lost in cultural translation. Irony only makes sense when you understand the cultural norms and assumptions from which irony arises. I have a friend who's Czech, a young composer who came here to visit Tanglewood and stayed with us Goodmans, and then whom we saw when we went to Prague. We exchange emails every few weeks, always in English, of course, since I don't know Czech; and whenever I write him I find I'm careful to use words straight. No irony, no humor even, not as

would be inherent in the words themselves, thoroughly earnest: writing to someone who is far from fluent in English, I realize I use words in their most plain sense for their most plain meaning. The foreignness would make irony undetectable, even nonsensical—and I worry it would make a fool of my friend, something I don't want to do.

The foreignness to us of Jesus' context, of the assumptions and norms of ancient Israel as occupied by the Roman Empire, of royalty and rule, of power and principalities, makes us perhaps a little foolish as regards this playing out of events, even earnestly ourselves playing out these events in imitation.

Congregations everywhere this morning will provide palms fronds for people to wave while everyone recites the familiar line, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" And I think it's a fine thing for congregations to do this on Palm Sunday. I think it's a fine thing for people to gather in worship this morning celebrating a triumphal entry. But it'd be even better if they were to do so—if *we* were to do so—with a dawning sense that something's a little funny about this king on parade, something's a little off...

I imagine that's how it was for that first gathered crowd. Gathering because a crowd was gathering, people heard word that someone was coming, something was happening, so they joined, a crowd justifying itself into an ever-greater crowd. And then came the celebration and chanting because what was coming was coming closer. And only a thing that deserved such a crowd would gather such a crowd—so it must be a big deal!

And here he came, and then here he was—this anticipated one, someone important, someone powerful.

Oh, but look, he's on donkey, on the foal of a donkey, so a very small donkey and one perhaps struggling under the weight of its rider.

Would it be okay?

Wait. Is this a joke?

People joined in, though—in on the celebration, in on the joke, whichever it was. They spread their cloaks on the road, not quite the red carpet that royalty as far back as Agamemnon and Clytemnestra were accustomed to. But who here had a red carpet? No one, of course.

So the cloaks would be a worthy substitute—or not quite worthy. Okay, maybe these were a part of the joke.

Maybe this is all a big joke!

By the time the parade had made its way into the city proper, the place was in turmoil. This joke, this provocation, this mockery of real power (the silliness of pomp and circumstance!), this threat that seemed uncowed by the prospect of real power coming in and a putting a swift end to this ridicule, this ridiculousness: “Who is this?” some asked. Others answered, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth.” Not that that helped much. Why would Jesus get a parade? And, wait, who was Jesus again—and he’s from *Nazareth*? No one’s from Nazareth.

One thing’s for certain: this whole goofy parade wouldn’t be nearly as much fun if this were the *real* king.

As you might know, we hear this story every year on this Sunday. Since it’s featured in all three synoptic gospels, we hear it each year of the three-year lectionary cycle—and always on this Sunday a week before Easter. The reason for this isn’t made plain in Matthew’s gospel, but it is in Mark and Luke—that the week which would end in Jesus’ crucifixion began with this “triumphal entry,” this provocation, this poking fun. So, as I’ve said every year in recent memory, it’s by this story that we’re brought into real time with Jesus. By this story, we can begin the day-by-day countdown until Thursday, the night of his arrest, and Friday, the day of his crucifixion and death, and Saturday, the Sabbath that was still if not restful.

It’s a week that would have Jesus by day in the city and in the Temple, and by night back on the Mount of Olives with his friends, each morning to return to the city as an invading presence, a conquering presence. It’s a week that would have Jesus overturning tables in the Temple and disrupting the business of sacrifice there; would have him squaring off against old adversaries and provoking new ones; would have him telling pointed parables—at the Sadducees, at the Pharisees. Time slows down this week, as the narrative becomes full of momentous details and events—the ten pieces of silver and Judas looking for an opportunity to betray him, the drawn sword as one of the disciples moves to defend him, the cock crowing once Peter has denied him, the calculus of leadership (“It’s better for one

man to die than for the whole nation to suffer.”) and a targeted strike. And here it begins, with this parade, this joke.

If you're not thrilled about considering Jesus a satirist or a clown, then rest assured, neither am I. But remember, there's a tradition in the church of equating Jesus with a clown. Granted, it's not a tradition I know much about beyond the portrayal of Jesus in the musical play *Godspell*. But a Malaysian Biblical scholar, Joas Adiprasetya, wrote in an article entitled, "Following Jesus the Clown," of the fact that both the clown of classical thought and Jesus of the gospels "live in their total otherness, perform both social critique and solidarity, and take the risk to be a victim and healer."

If that all seems a little too philosophical, though, consider the role comedy has come to play in our contemporary political discourse and life together. In a piece on the news website *Vox*, Carlos Maza investigates the phenomenon that first came into play in the 70s when Saturday Night Live's Weekend Update featured (first) Chevy Chase and (then) Jane Curtin; but that really came into the big time on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* in the 00s.

Considering now our current clowns, Samantha Bee, Seth Myers, Stephen Colbert, and Trevor Noah, Mr. Maza has a theory as to why they matter. "...beyond the jokes and sight gags, political satirists have done an excellent job of seriously covering [recent news]—sometimes even better than major TV news networks. And that's because, while traditional journalists feel compelled to take [the administration's] often absurd statements and conspiracy theories seriously, political satirists have demonstrated an extremely low tolerance for bull----."

By contrast, "serious" journalists labor under the expectation that, to be taken seriously, they must take their subject matter seriously. But the subject matter isn't always serious itself, and so doesn't deserve such serious consideration. Worse, to consider it seriously is to feed its duplicitous aim. "Sophia McClennan, author of *Colbert's America* and co-author of *Is Satire Saving Our Nation?*, argues that part of what makes satire so useful for covering [politics in recent time] is that it encourages audiences to think critically. [She writes,] 'Political satire is about showing you that the system is faking you out. ... It fires up the mind to say, "Hmm, this doesn't seem right."'"

If Jesus were indeed a satirist of the powers of principalities of his day, at least as we remember him this morning, I wonder what were the things he meant to point to so to have minds and hearts fired up, so to have people come to the suspicion, “Hmm, this doesn’t seem right.” That the power by which the world really lives and thrives is love, that what feeds and fuels this power is forgiveness, that the sort of king the world really needs is one who takes unto himself the fears and needs of his people, that the majesty of this king is to be found not in things of exploit but in things offered, that what seriousness and gravitas there is in this true it expresses itself in joy and play and making fun.

This week, of course, the fun will dissipate, and fear and despair will overwhelm, which we’ll remember in worship—on Thursday for a supper, and on Friday to hear Jesus’ last words from the cross. This isn’t the last thing, I know you know. More will come. But that’s where we are right now.

Thanks be to God.