

The Inaugural Parade

Matthew 21:1-9
Palm Sunday; March 20, 2005
Bethany Church
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Behind every parade is a purpose. Parades can become such a tradition that you don't think about why. Have you ever thought about homecoming parades? Certainly, purposes can shift; and with royalty, a dance and a football game, we may think of school pride; but homecoming festivities and parades were developed to get the school's alumni to return. It wasn't the students and football team coming home. It was the alumni who now drew paychecks.

Today, I want us to think about the purpose of Palm Sunday. Why did God orchestrate a public parade for his son Jesus? What is its purpose? What is its significance?

Sometimes, people will answer the question of purpose superficially. They'll say that the parade occurred to fulfill prophecy. Well, then why did God have the parade prophesied? They'll answer because it was going to happen. Whoa! It happened because it was prophesied, and it was prophesied because it was going to happen. That answer doesn't get us anywhere. We just go around in a circle, and hear no purpose. Does God have no purpose in his activity? God is full of purpose in everything he does.

Palm Sunday obviously was planned. Jesus was approaching Jerusalem when he stopped. He sent two disciples ahead to the village of Bethphage. Jesus told them they would find a donkey and its colt tied up there, and that they should untie and bring them to him. Jesus told the disciples to tell inquirers that "*the Lord has need of them.*" Matthew, Mark and Luke all thought that was important enough to record in their gospels that everything occurred just as

Jesus said. Obviously, it was planned. Indeed, in fulfillment of biblical prophecy, Jesus mounted the colt. His entrance into Jerusalem was planned, and it was planned to be public.

A few months earlier, it was the Feast of Tabernacles and there was a plot to kill Jesus. His brothers, among whom two wrote books in the New Testament (James and Jude), were skeptical of Jesus, and they bated him to go Jerusalem publicly. Jesus put them off and then entered Jerusalem secretly (John 7:2). Months later at Passover time, there still was a plot to kill Jesus; but despite that, Jesus entered Jerusalem by parade.

God does much secretly. About a year before the Berlin Wall came down, one American Christian booked a flight to Berlin, walked to the wall, laid hands on it and prayed for it to come down; and then, conducting no meetings, no tourism, no business he flew back home. At that time, there was no inkling the wall would come down in our lifetime. Everything he did was under the radar of public scrutiny. It was totally unnoticed and seemed misguided. These secret incursions directed by God occur all the time. George Mueller is a name known to many. He was a devout man of prayer. He lived in the British Isles in the difficult days of World War II. Articles and books have been written about how often the very things he prayed would become reality on the battlefield. If my memory serves me correctly, I believe Winston Churchill had heard of, but never met George Mueller. The point is that God often works below the radar of public vision.

Thus, if God orchestrates a parade, there must be a significant purpose. The certainty that God orchestrated this parade comes not only from the circumstances surrounding the donkey and its fulfillment of written prophecy. It also comes from Jesus' claim in a parallel account in Luke. The Pharisees tell Jesus to rebuke his followers for their praise. Jesus responds:

If they kept quiet, the stones along the road would burst into cheers! (Luke 19:40, NLT)

Jesus, who snuck into Jerusalem months earlier, identified the people's cheers as a God-thing. God was orchestrating this parade. What was his purpose?

Well, it wasn't immediate peace and tranquility. The Bible says:

The entire city of Jerusalem was stirred as he entered. "Who is this?" they asked. (Matthew 21:10, NLT)

Emotional exchanges were going on in Jerusalem. I don't know if you ever have watched those shows on news channels where they have people of different opinions speak. If you can imagine a Crossfire, Hardball, Capital Gang, or O'Reilly Factor on "who is Jesus?", that is what took place in Jerusalem. Since Jerusalem was and is a religious city, since it was and is an occupied city, since it was and is a divided city, this discussion carried plenty of heat.

Involvement in the parade was controversial. Would you and I have joined the chorus of praise, or would we have been too afraid to offend our neighbors, employers, customers or whomever?

The purpose of this parade is revealed in its planned and public nature, in the prophecy it fulfilled and in the chants of the people. Matthew cited words of the prophet Zechariah:

Tell the people of Israel, "Look, your King is coming to you. He is humble, riding on a donkey — even on a donkey's colt." (Matthew 21:5, NLT)

Jesus didn't ride into Bethlehem; he rode into Jerusalem, a nation's capital. He didn't ride into Jerusalem as a religious teacher. He rode into Jerusalem as its rightful ruler. He rode as the divinely appointed Messiah-leader with the authority to direct and bless its community life. He didn't ride on a warhorse to conquer those who resist. He rode on the colt of a donkey to serve and liberate the people who would welcome him.

As the city's skyline unfolded before him, he began to weep (Luke 19:41). The economic, political, moral, and military destiny of the city hinged on their acceptance or rejection of Jesus. He already knew their verdict, and he saw their future. It broke his heart.

The prophet Zechariah said, “*See your king is coming*” (Zechariah 9:9); but the people didn’t believe. The prophet Isaiah wrote: “*See, your Savior comes*” (Isaiah 62:11); but the people didn’t listen.

God gave witness to Jesus also through the shouts and chants on the parade route:

Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest! (Matthew 21:9, NIV)

Son of David speaks of a ruler anointed by God. *Hosanna* is a Hebrew expression meaning *save* or *liberate*. It is a word of praise for a liberating king. When Jesus left the parade route and entered the courtyard of the temple, the little kids kept yelling it. By now the adults were sensible to the strong reaction of their fellow citizens. The religious leaders were hot with anger hearing those chants from the children. They rebuked Jesus: “***Do you hear what these children are saying?***” Jesus replied:

Yes... have you never read, “From the lips of children and infants, you have ordained praise?” (Matthew 21:16, NIV)

The kids were saying at the temple exactly what God wanted them to say. Jesus was the religious and civic, personal and social, inward and outward hope of the people. He would not be confined to comfortable compartments people might prefer.

The Palm Sunday parade reminds us that Jesus is not a religious teacher. He did some of that, and many would prefer that he be confined to that; but that is not his identity or the role God gave him in this world. The Bible reveals that he is not merely a Jewish leader. Again, many would prefer that, but it is not his identity or role on this planet.

We live in a religiously pluralistic culture. Some believe that peace and freedom can only be maintained if people’s beliefs have no discussion in public forums and have no sway on public decisions. Excuse me if that sounds more like Marxism than democracy. In Marxism, the

state enforces an atheistic posture in decision-making. They call it secularism and a secular state. This was not a secular state. It was a state where people could freely pursue community and social policy informed by their own religious perspective, whether that included a personal God or not.

The Palm Sunday parade reminds us that Jesus is not merely a private god or a household idol. He is liberator for the nations. Where he is received, there is freedom. Where he is rejected, tyranny follows. That is the destiny and future of Rochester, Minnesota and America.

Jesus is no personal pill of comfort. His lordship brings life to communities and nations. For God's favor is restored by Jesus' work. It was God's favor that changed the fortune of businessmen and their families like Abraham, Jacob, Joseph and the nation of Israel. It is God's favor that we seek for ourselves, our families, our neighborhoods, communities and nations.

God has signaled to you and me what brings that favor. Will we believe?