

Triumph

A Sermon Expositing John 12:1-12

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Once in a while, under certain circumstances the rules could be suspended. It was important that the world knew that Rome stood above and apart from the rest of world, that a division be created between the civilized, metropolitan center of the empire and all the lands in need of subduing, occupying, and civilizing. To that end there was a line around the perimeter of the ancient city called the pomerium. Roman generals whose commissions were seen to be for and in the wider world in need of subduing could not cross that line into the city. If they did, their commissions were instantly dissolved and they became just an ordinary citizen of Rome – except in one circumstance.

A general who had waged a successful campaign to conquer or subdue some region of the world thereby extending Rome's boundaries and tax and tribute base could petition the senate for permission to enter the city. If they and the Plebeian Council agreed then one single day was identified for the general to be allowed to cross into the city, and quite a day it would be.

The citizens of Rome would be notified of the day and that morning they would be gathered at the entrance to the city and lining the traditional route the general would take. Before he would enter the city the people would be treated to a rolling display of art and artifacts. Giant paintings depicting the landscapes of the far off and strange world that had been conquered were carted through along with statues clad in the exotic clothing of the nation newly under Roman control. Just behind those carts would roll carts full of the spoils of war – precious metals, coins, religious icons and images. Trailing those would be a cadre of citizens of the captured land sometimes with their monarch in full regalia, now made a form of human show and tell. The message was clear. Thanks to the one about to enter the city, these exotic people have been civilized and now their wealth is our wealth too.

With the onlookers whipped into an excited frenzy the moment would finally come for the victorious general to enter the city. He would be clad entirely in purple, the color of royalty, and would ride in a chariot drawn either by white war horses or by some other exotic animal, trapped in the conquered land, tamed and brought to Rome. Legend even tells us that one triumph was stalled for a time, because the elephants enlisted to draw the chariot wouldn't fit through the city gate. The conqueror was flanked by the soldiers who, under his command, subdued foreigners at the point of their swords. The adoring crowd would cheer and borrowing from the imagery of sport would wave those symbols of victory often given to winners of contests – palm branches. The procession continued through the streets of Rome, made its way to the Via Sacra and to the temple of Jupiter where the victorious general would lead in the sacrifice of white bulls giving thanks for success and marking the beginning of the city-wide feasting.

It was quite a way to enter a city, that's for sure. The whole affair was referred to as a "triumph." It was a *triumphal entry* to the city. The celebration would continue through the day and into the night when the triumphator would be escorted to his new home in the city. In the morning the official end to the day of triumph would come and the general's commission would dissolve legally. He was retired, but over the next few days or

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

week there would still be feasting and games and merriment often at the personal expense of the new most popular man in town.

It is thought that one of these spectacles occurred every three to four years in the last couple of centuries BCE. They were infrequent enough to hold their power as propaganda, but common enough that most everyone in the Roman world would have heard the stories of such *triumphs*. One may well assume that even those who heard the stories and told the stories and eventually wrote the stories of Jesus down would have known of these *triumphal entries* and the propagandized message they bore.

Whether the account Ivan read for us from John this morning and its three sibling texts in the other three gospels are rigorously accurate historical accounts or are literary conveyances of the themes and messages of the life of Jesus, there can be no doubt that what we've read is highly influenced by – really an answer to – the Roman triumph. We might think of the triumphal entry of Jesus (if not the whole of the gospels) as a kind of satire of the Roman empire. The punchlines found on Saturday Night Live may not be as pronounced in the Bible, but like satirical writers, John is certainly thumbing his nose at the world being built up by the Romans by using their own image against them. And like satire, the message is found where the likeness diverges from reality.

Just as a victorious general, Jesus enters a city flanked by adorers waving palm branches, but this is a different city in a different time. The crowds are there for Passover, a celebration of God's deliverance of the Hebrew people from slavery. The governing Romans know such a celebration can spark the liberationist ideals within the crowds, so extra troops are sent to Jerusalem during Passover to prevent any ideas of revolt from becoming reality. The presence of the soldiers alone has exacerbated tensions and led to riots in the past. The Roman triumphator, you see, is celebrated when leaving the danger of battle behind and entering a secure city. Jesus is praised though, precisely when he is moving toward danger, indeed toward his own death.

He is moving in that way mounted upon a donkey where a triumphator would be carried most commonly by war horses. Nobody has ever heard of a war donkey. Their temperament is far better suited for agriculture than conquest. Their burden is to help grow things, to help bring about and sustain life rather than to squelch it. The donkey not only bears Jesus's physical body, but also his image into Jerusalem. The celebrated general is so because of the path of fear and death he has generated to dominate some others. Jesus's path to this moment is full of those whose lives, identities, and livelihoods have been restored to them. The general's day of glory, laud, and honor serves the purpose of propagandizing not only Rome's uniqueness, but it's superiority to the rest of the world and thereby delineate and protect its boundaries physical and ideological. Those waving palm branches to Jesus were ushering in one who brought up the lowly so that the world might know equity and one who defied borders and boundaries in just that pursuit. The conqueror looked ahead to this moment in time, because in the week following his triumph he would go to great expense to see that his popularity grew and grew and grew. In the week following Jesus's entry to the city he too would pay a very high price, but only because his popularity would wane to the point of being put to death as if he were a traitor to his people.

So very often it is said that those who were waving palms welcoming Jesus to the center of their cultural, civic, and religious lives in Jerusalem simply did not understand that his intent was to be a kind of spiritual king reigning over matters of the heart rather than over realms of the world. This is why, we are often told, the tide of popularity turned against him. But he came to this moment by clothing, feeding, healing, touching those suffering under the exploitation of a far off empire. His entry to Jerusalem, at great peril to himself, had as its very purpose the confrontation of the religious, military, and political elite. It's true those shouting out "Hosanna" didn't fully understand Jesus's mission, but if they thought his mission was to reform this world. What they did not expect was the *mode* by which this world might be redeemed. Not by exploitation or domination or by violent means, or the machinations of empire but by self-giving love.

This is the one at our gates claiming triumph. Shall we shout Hosanna or Crucify?
Amen.