

“With the Grain of the Universe”

I.

“Teacher, order your disciples to stop.”

Hardly a ringing endorsement. But Luke’s Gospel reminds us that not everybody picked up a palm branch when Jesus came to town. On Palm Sunday the Pharisees sound nervous. I can’t say I blame them. It does not take an expert to see that this will end badly.

By now, almost everybody has heard about this so-called rabbi, this up-country bumpkin with his ragtag mob of followers. And most of what they have heard has not been good: They say he defies the traditions of the elders. They say he hangs out with outcasts, eats with sinners. They say he stirs up trouble wherever he goes.

And now we might have a problem, because he seems to be going straight into Jerusalem. What is he thinking? Why does he have to do it today? Today starts the week-long celebration of Passover, a time when the city fills up with pilgrims and tourists, a time when the Roman authorities tend to feel a little twitchy. At Passover, Israel remembers God’s mighty act of deliverance, leading them out of Egypt, from bondage into freedom. It is a dangerous memory for a people still oppressed. It inspires all sorts of crazy ideas. And so, every single year, on the first day of the week, Rome opens the festivities with a show of force. The Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, processes into the city with an enormous entourage: armed troops, soldiers on horseback, rank upon rank marching into town with one unambiguous message: do not mess with Rome.¹

But isn’t that exactly what Jesus is doing? Isn’t his procession a dangerous idea? Even as Pilate and his entourage enter town from the west, Jesus rides in from the east, from the Mount of Olives. He has no chariot, but rides on some stupid little donkey. He has no army, but comes surrounded by his scruffy peasant followers. And they have the nerve to call him a king.

It is almost like he is taunting the Romans.²

No wonder the Pharisees sound nervous. This is bound to end badly.

II.

I understand them, these Pharisees. To be honest, they remind me of me: religious folks, well-educated, by nature careful and cautious. The unwashed masses may get swept up in all of this ruckus, but the Pharisees are smarter than that. They know enough to play it safe, to stay on the sidelines and watch the parade pass by.

Why take chances? Why risk the wrath of the Empire? Because let us be clear: that is exactly what Jesus is doing. This little parade that he and his followers are staging poses an open and obvious challenge to the rule of Rome. By coming to town at this time, in this way, Jesus claims an authority that trumps that of Caesar; he and his followers announce the arrival of the reign of God.

What do you suppose Caesar will have to say about that?

Now, the Pharisees are not naïve, and they certainly are not admirers of Rome. They know all about the oppression and injustice of life in the Empire –egregious taxes to fund endless foreign military adventures; an arrogant ruling class increasingly out of touch with the people it exploits; a so-called peace secured by the threat of swift and brutal violence. The Pharisees despise the Empire as much as anyone. They are just trying to make the best of a bad situation.

And Rome is happy to help. The Empire has always accommodated religion –so long as it knows its place. Believe in one god, or many; pray every day, on the Sabbath day or not at all; believe in the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Moses and Miriam or believe, if you want, in the Flying Spaghetti Monster³ –Rome does not care. So long as religion stays in its place, so long as religion does not rock the boat, so long as religion realizes that Caesar calls the shots, Rome likes religion just fine.

But events of Palm Sunday violate the spirit of this arrangement. Jesus and his crowd refuse to play by the rules. They defy the Empire, denounce its ways, openly announce their allegiance to the reign of God. They practically poke Caesar in the eye.

Rome can not stand for that. It is a shame, of course, but what else would you expect? Anyone who would flout the Empire in this way takes a tremendous risk. Anyone who rides into town today, playing at being a king, will probably end up on a cross.

This will not end well. No wonder the Pharisees are nervous.

III.

“Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” That is what the Pharisees say. But I am struck by Jesus’ response. He seems so serene, so assured. He seems to know something that they do not know: *“I tell you,”* he says, *“if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”*⁴

Maybe they already are.

Luke’s account of Palm Sunday suggests some things we do not always notice about this parade. It has an incredible cast of characters –not all of them human. There is, for instance, the colt –never ridden by anyone, ever. But Jesus just lays his hand on this animal, and without so much as a word, the colt is along for the ride –as if it knows the significance of this moment.

And then, of course, there are the angels. You may have missed them –Luke is subtle at this point- but we have reason to suspect that the angels take part in this parade. All four of the Gospel writers report the cries of the crowd as a quotation from Psalm 118: *“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”* But only Luke includes that second line: *“Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”* Does that remind you of anything? Luke is the most musical of the Gospels, and this line is a reprise of the angels’ song to the shepherds, way back in chapter two, in Luke’s account of Christmas. Now the crowd takes up that refrain. In the Palm Sunday procession, if we listen carefully, we can hear the echoes of angels.⁵

The donkey, the angels, the stones in the street –all of them take part in the parade, all of them know what all of this means. As Jesus rides into Jerusalem today, the entire creation comes along for the ride.

What do you suppose Caesar will be able to do about that?

IV.

It all reminds me of a line from the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, who once said that *“people who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe.”*⁶ With the grain of the universe. The donkey, the angels, the stones all testify to this truth. Luke wants us to realize that, as Jesus rides into Jerusalem today, as he and his followers mount this blatant challenge to the supremacy of Empire, creation itself is taking a side.

I bet the Pharisees never saw that coming. Like everybody else, they are heavily invested in Roman propaganda; they really do believe all of Rome’s boasts about itself. But Rome is all hat and no cattle, all sizzle and no steak. All of the Empire’s alleged power—its splendor, its size, its vaunted military might—all of it is founded on illusion, on smoke and mirrors. Caesar

may have managed to convince the world that might makes right—that the rich make the rules, that scarcity is forever and sharing is for chumps—Caesar may be able to get that message out, Caesar may own all the newspapers and 24-hour cable news networks, but none of that makes Caesar right. None of that means that Caesar is telling the truth.

Palm Sunday suggests that Caesar is wrong. The Bible suggests that Caesar is wrong. When God created the heavens and the earth, God saw that everything was good, that everything was very good indeed. And when our broken ways marred God's good creation, the God who made it good promised to one day make it well. That is why the God of Passover freed an entire people from bondage in Egypt and entered into a covenant with them. That is why the Spirit of Pentecost still gathers us into the church, calling us to be a peculiar people. And that is why Jesus rides into Jerusalem today. Love, justice, sharing and peace are not some nice ideas that we might maybe get around to enacting some day. Love, justice, sharing and peace are woven into the fabric of the universe itself; they are the heart of reality, the truest truth we know. When Jesus openly challenges the empty claims of Caesar, he does not do it alone. He brings the entire creation along with him.

But where will that leave the Pharisees?

V.

In one sense, the Pharisees are right: this will not end well. Jesus may ride triumphantly into town today, but it is all downhill from here. The Empire is on to him. Soon the crowd will turn on him. On Thursday night, he will share the Passover meal with his closest friends. One of them will betray him, another will deny him. All of them will forsake him and flee. He will be arrested, abused, accused of sedition and blasphemy. Rome will have its way with him. On Friday he will go to the cross. And then the respectable people, the religious people, will sigh with relief and say to themselves, "We were right. We were right all along." And they would be—except for Sunday.

It is funny how history repeats itself. All of these centuries later, some of us are still playing it safe, still standing on the sidelines, still watching from a distance and wondering how all of this will turn out. Some of us still subscribe to all the propaganda that Rome can produce. Some of us respectable religious people have more than made our peace with the Empire.

But today is Palm Sunday. The parade is passing by. And we don't have to stand on the sidelines anymore. Like the colt, like the angels, like the stones about to shout, we can fall behind this Jesus and follow where all of this is leading—through the darkness of Thursday, the desolation of Friday, the silence of Saturday. We can follow all the way to early Sunday morning...and to all that lies beyond.

It will not be an easy journey. So long as Caesar still seems to call the shots, we will risk having to carry a cross. But when we find our place in this parade, we know that creation is on our side; we know how the story will end.

Today, of all days, may God give us the grace to come off the curb, out into the parade—to start walking, and working, with the grain of the universe.

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¹ For background information on the Passover, see the entry in *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*. Revised Ed. Paul J. Achtemeier, Ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp. 810-812.

² I originally owe the image of Jesus' Palm Sunday procession as a "counter procession," a sort-of satirical/prophetic protest to Pilate's own procession, to Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan's *The Last Week: The Day-by-Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem*. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), pp.1-30. R. Alan Culpepper goes into considerable detail to make the same point, quoting at length from Josephus' accounts of various Greco-Roman entrance processions in *The New Interpreter's Bible. New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), pp.365-371. But it does not take a contemporary scholar to note Jesus' intentions here. John Calvin writes: "One might think, therefore, that he intentionally exposed himself to the ridicule of all. But as he had two things to do at the same time,--as he had to exhibit some proof of his kingdom, and to show that it does not resemble earthly kingdoms, and does not consist of the fading riches of this world, it was altogether necessary for him to take this method." *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Volume II*. Translated by the Rev. William Pringle. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), p.447.

³ The Flying Spaghetti Monster is the deity worshipped by The Church of The Flying Spaghetti Monster, also known as the Pastafarian movement. The church was founded by Oregon State physics graduate Bobby Henderson as a satirical response to the Kansas State Board of Education decision to teach the theory of intelligent design as an alternative to evolution in the public schools. Those desiring to know more are directed to the relevant Wikipedia page: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flying_Spaghetti_Monster

⁴ "In other words, some things simply must be said; the disciples are expressing what is ultimately and finally true; God will provide a witness though every mouth be stopped; opposition to Christian witness can not succeed; and the truth will come out, it cannot long be silenced." Fred Craddock. *Luke*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. James L. Mays, Editor. (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), p.228.

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson overhears angels' songs in this story, and makes the connection to Luke's account of Christmas. *Sacra Pagina Series, Volume 3: The Gospel of Luke*. Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., Editor. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), pp.295-302.

⁶ John Howard Yoder, "Armaments and Eschatology," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 1 (1988): 58. I probably first encountered this quotation when Stanley Hauerwas took it as the title for his Gifford Lectures, published as *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001). Hauerwas led me to Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*. 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), which is an outstanding book.