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Series: Wandering Hearts: Figuring Out Faith with Peter

Sermon Title: Jesus Confronts

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Text: [John 12:12-16](#)

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We are following Jesus to Jerusalem through the eyes and ears and heart of Peter, and we've reached the beginning of Holy Week. We've reached Jerusalem. You might have noticed that this is Palm Sunday when we remember the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem. You might say that today is the beginning of the end. This week, I urge you not to jump too quickly to Easter. This week will take us to the upper room for the last supper, to the arrest and trial of Jesus, to his crucifixion, and to his burial. Through all of that, we'll follow Peter.

We're following Peter because many of us can see ourselves in Peter. We can relate to his mountaintop experiences and to his valleys. Like us, he's navigating life as he goes and sometimes, at least in hindsight, doesn't get it even close to right. In our passage today, Peter is not mentioned by name, so we have to imagine where he is in the story as we witness the events of the day. As you think about the events of this day in the story, try to imagine where we might find Peter and maybe that will be where we will find ourselves as well.

The crowds have been trying to make Jesus their king for a long while now, and today is their day. The crowds by the side of the lake started it all. When that crowd saw the sign that Jesus had done—feeding five thousand people with five barley loaves and two fish—they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

This word spread as the crowd's enthusiasm for Jesus grew. They decided to coronate him on the spot, and Jesus knew it. Six chapters ago in John, it said, "When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself" (John 6:15). The crowd wanted to make Jesus their kind of king, and Jesus wanted no part of it.

In our reading today, the crowd that comes up from the country to purify themselves for the Passover festival has the same idea. They want to make Jesus their kind of king. The crowd hears that Jesus is coming into Jerusalem. And they are sporting for a fight. “Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him” (John 11:57).

We know that the chief priests and Pharisees have already decided to kill Jesus because of the crowds that Jesus is drawing. They’ve decided to kill Lazarus, too, because they need to eliminate the living evidence of the sign that Jesus performed by raising Lazarus from the dead. The word is out that the religious authorities are looking for Jesus. For Jesus to show up today in Jerusalem, the heart of where everything is happening, would be a direct, in-your-face challenge to their authority. And the buzz on the street is that Jesus is coming.¹

That’s where our passage begins. The passage begins with a time reference to “the next day.” Anytime there is a statement like that, especially at the beginning, I am forced to ask the question, “What happened on the previous day?” Well, that was the day that Jesus had dinner with Martha and Lazarus and Mary. Mary took some expensive perfume and poured it on Jesus’ feet. Judas was there, too, and complained about how much money they were pouring down the drain, and Jesus rebuked him.

With that context then, we are now on “the next day.” A large crowd has gathered at the feast of Passover in Jerusalem. A smaller group is coming from Bethany and converging into the mass. The word is spreading of Jesus having raised Lazarus from the dead. And certainly, they also knew of many of his other miracles. The crowd arms themselves with palm branches and goes out to meet Jesus, who is riding on a donkey, and they are singing his praises, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!” (John 12:13).

All of the things in these very few verses hold symbolic meaning. The palm branches are mentioned in Leviticus as being used in festive occasions such as feasts and procession of kings. Donkeys can be found throughout scripture. They are associated with kings and their arrival in peace, whereas kings on horses signified war. Here in John 12, the mention of the donkey shows the symbolic fulfillment of the prophecy in Zechariah: “See, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9). And...and, don’t lose sight of the Christmas story—that’s when Jesus first rode on a donkey, still with Mary and on their way to Bethlehem.

And those words they shout as Jesus comes into Jerusalem are straight from the Psalms. “Save us...blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD” (Psalm 118:25). The translation says, “save us,” but the word is “hosanna”; that means “save us!” That was the parade. Not a big one—just one entry: Jesus on a donkey. Have you ever gone to a parade and thought, “That was magnificent” or “That wasn’t what I was expecting”?

¹ Background on the text from “Commentary on John 12:12-27; 19:16b-22,” April 13, 2014 by Craig A. Satterlee found at www.workingpreacher.org.

Every year, our family goes to the 500 Festival Parade. Even those in the family who don't go to the actual Indy 500 go to the parade in downtown Indianapolis. There are lots of traditions both in the family and in the parade. For our part of the family, we bring the frozen grapes and the carrots. People like the grapes but not the carrots. We bring them anyway. We love the Indianapolis Metro Police Department motorcycle unit as they come within inches of us standing on the front row and we cheer on the 500 drivers, waiting patiently for row number one as they pass us counting backwards from row 11.

In their book *The Last Week*, New Testament scholars John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, point out that the parade that heralded Jesus' entry into Jerusalem wasn't the largest or most spectacular parade in town during that particular Passover season.² It would be like having the 500 Festival Parade and having another neighborhood parade (that Jesus was in) take place a mile or so down the road on the same day.

The authors remind us that back then, Jerusalem was a destination hotspot—a tourist town. The city's population swelled from 40,000 to 200,000 during the holidays, and Passover was one of the busiest holidays. Crossan and Borg point out that there were two processions into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday. One we know well and commemorate today with the waving of palm branches. We remember a peasant riding a donkey, accompanied by his peasant followers coming from the east into Jerusalem.

Also entering Jerusalem at Passover, from the west, was the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Like the Roman governors of Judea before him, Pilate lived in Caesarea by the sea. In other words, Pilate spent most of his time at his beach house. But with crowds of devout Jews flowing into Jerusalem to commemorate their liberation from Egypt, the Roman Governors would put on a display of force, to deter the Jews from getting too exuberant about the possibility of liberation from Rome. Pilate's procession was the visible manifestation of Imperial Roman power.

Once a year, during the Passover, the Roman governor moved his headquarters to Jerusalem in a show of strength designed to prevent any outbreaks of insurgency or rebellion against Roman rule. Such outbreaks were a constant danger both because Roman rule imposed economic hardship on their subject nations and because no one likes the foot of a foreign power on their necks. In a show of military force, the bigger parade, according to the authors, would have included "cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold."³

The sound of "marching feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums" would have had a sobering effect on all who saw this parade. There would have been no shouts of "Hosanna"

² The historical information about the two processions is from Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 2-5.

³ Ibid

as the powerful Pilate rode on his horse, hoping to strike fear into the resentful onlookers. As Pilate led a regiment of his own most trusted soldiers into town, it was a show of force. He did so with confidence, knowing that he was backed up by battalions of Rome's finest soldiers stationed on the west side of Jerusalem ready to flood into the city at Pilate's command.

All of the gospels tell of the smaller Palm Sunday parade, but each gospel tells it slightly differently. Mark's Gospel, the earliest we have, written some 50 years after the event, spends more time telling us about the preparations for Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem than about the event itself. He talks about the colt and how the disciples secured it for Jesus. By the time Luke gets around to telling the story, some 60 or 70 years after the event, the colt is a donkey.

Matthew can't seem to decide, so that gospel has the disciples bring a donkey and a colt, and Jesus sits on them—both it seems—and rides them into Jerusalem. They spread their cloaks on the road and some lay leafy branches on the road. According to the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, these are just any old leafy branches, and Luke doesn't have any branches at all. By the time you get to the Gospel of John, written last of the four some 70 to 80 years after the event, the leafy branches are named as branches of palm trees.

So, there are two parades—the Festival 500 parade-sized event coming from the north and west that was a military show of force and the one-entry parade coming in from the east. What are we 21st-century Christians to do with Palm Sunday? It seems to me that no matter how you look at the story of this amazing procession into Jerusalem, you can't help but see the image of a Jesus who offers us a choice between two parades. Two processions: Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's parade proclaimed the power of empire.

Make no mistake, the attraction of the power and the might of Pilate's military parade with all its glory and wonder is still there to tempt us. Power and might, greed and violence attract more attention and more converts than the path less traveled. It's easy to simply get caught up in the enthusiasm of the crowds and join the processions that have the loudest brass bands or the most elaborate floats or the greatest number of celebrities or the most charismatic leaders. It's easy to miss the counter-procession that is taking place on the other side of town—the one where Jesus is riding on a humble donkey, becoming a messiah, not by violence but by courageous loving and serving. He will demonstrate that later this week when he washes the disciples' feet.

Two processions. Two kingdoms. Two symbolic journeys into Jerusalem. Stallion or donkey? Parade or protest? Which one did Peter choose? It doesn't say—we assume, but we don't know, and especially based on the events that will come later in the week, we really don't know. Was Peter already getting cold feet because of the risk of following Jesus too closely? Which one will we choose?

Holy Week reminds us how easily we are distracted and fooled by fancier parades and promises. Power does not come from domination or oppression but rather flows from love and service. There are two

parades today. Just as Jesus confronted institutions of power that day, he confronts us today with the question: Which parade will you attend?