

The Drama of Palm Sunday

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Scripture: Luke 19:28-40, NRSV
Hymn: VT 312 – Jesus Is Coming

Luke 19:28-40, NRSV:

²⁸ After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

²⁹ When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰ saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” ³² So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ³⁴ They said, “The Lord needs it.” ³⁵ Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸ saying,

“Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!”

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” ⁴⁰ He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Dorothy Sayers, a British playwright and novelist and contemporary and friend of C.S. Lewis once described the Gospel as “the greatest drama ever staged.”¹ She compared the story of Jesus, especially his Passion, to classical Greek tragedies, except that in this story, “a number of quite commonplace human beings, in an obscure province of the Roman Empire, killed and murdered God Almighty – quite casually, almost as a matter of political and religious routine, and certainly with no notion that they were doing anything out of the way.”² As a playwright herself, she saw great drama and irony in the Gospel story, and expressed disappointment that the church had made it into something

¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Greatest Drama Ever Staged is the Official Creed of Christendom,” in *The Whimsical Christian: 18 Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 11.

² Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Man Born to Be King: A Play-Cycle on the Life of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1943), 5.

so – well, boring! And “this in the Name of One who assuredly never bored a soul in those thirty-three years during which he passed through the world like a flame.”³ For Sayers, this story, like all good dramas, should shock and terrify and inspire us! She asked, “are we sufficiently disturbed by this extremely disturbing story?”⁴ And if not, what is it we’re doing when we retell – and even re-enact – this ancient drama?

Well, though I’m sometimes a dramatic person, I’m no expert in theatre and acting. Thankfully, we all know someone who is! I turned to Dean Stockdale, who grew up in this congregation and is currently in drama school, and they sat down with their friend and fellow-actor Kijo Gatama. The two of them shared this conversation about the common ground between acting, spirituality, and community worship. Here’s what they had to say. [PLAY VIDEO]

What a fascinating set of comparisons! So thanks to Dean and Kijo’s insights, we learn that there are two things happening when we retell or re-enact ancient stories like that of Palm Sunday and Jesus’ Passion story. One layer is what is happening when the actors take on their roles. Through deep empathy with their character, actors essentially become them on stage. As Kijo said, “even if you don’t like this character, you have to find something in them that makes them human for you, that makes them relatable to you.” Dean said, “to become another person, you have to see them as yourself. We are all one being, really.” This ability to empathize so deeply even with the most unlikely or unlikable characters provides an example to all of us of finding common humanity with one another and creating more inclusive communities of welcome and belonging for a diversity of people.

³ Sayers, *Man Born to Be King*, 21, and *Dorothy L. Sayers: Spiritual Writings*, ed. Ann Loades (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1993), 54.

⁴ Sayers, *Spiritual Writings*, 9.

The other part of it is what's going on for the rest of us, watching the actors in the unfolding drama. As they model this deep empathy, we empathize with them, and are drawn into the story. In the case of biblical stories, we connect with what Dean called our "ancestral stories" and their "life lessons," which have ongoing relevance to our lives. Through this, as Kijo said, there is a "process of bringing the past into our present and really keeping the learnings and lessons alive." Through embodying these stories, they are brought to life, re-enacted in the present. And this in turn shapes our lives as disciples. After all, in worship we are not passive observers or simply an 'audience' – we're the congregation, participants being shaped by the story, seeing it embodied and being sent to likewise embody it ourselves in our daily lives.

The *Voices Together: Worship Leader Edition* says something very similar about using drama in worship, the way the children did for us today: "Worship brings together God's story and the stories of our lives and the world. Embodying these stories through voice and movement can invite worshippers into this divine drama," by "illustrating a new vantage point" or "bring[ing] out characters in the story that might otherwise be hidden or unseen."⁵ The children brought this 2,000 year old story alive for us today, helping us see the very familiar story of Palm Sunday in a new light. Did it feel like it was happening before your very eyes? Did you experience the confusion of the disciples, the excitement of the crowd, the air of celebration as they took part in this parade that meant that somehow, change was coming? And did you hear the defiance in Jesus' voice as he stood up to the Pharisee's call for silence?

Adding yet another layer of drama onto this, I want to suggest that the original events were themselves a type of drama. You see, Jesus didn't come up with the idea

⁵ "Drama in Worship," *Voices Together: Worship Leader Edition* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2020), #176.

for a Passover parade out of the blue. As scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write, there was a tradition of the Roman governor (none other than Pontius Pilate) processing into the city of Jerusalem at each major Jewish festival. This was an intimidation tactic, a show of the military might of the occupying Romans, to remind the Jewish people who was really in charge as they gathered for their religious festivals. Borg and Crossan even suggest that these two processions might have occurred at the same time, on different sides of the city! They write, "Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. . . . One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down from the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class. . . . On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers."⁶ So Jesus' entry into the city was a kind of parody of that other parade meant to inspire fear. On Palm Sunday, Jesus enacted a kind of street-theatre that challenged the Romans and inspired the people to see the reality of the peaceful kingdom among them rather than the violence and repression of the *pax Romana*. As the children entered the story in their drama this morning, they in turn invited all of us to pick up our palm branches and join in, following the Jesus Way, embodying this ancient drama in our lives of discipleship. AMEN.

⁶ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: The Day-by-Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 2-3.