



THE WORK OF IMAGINATION

Devotional



Growing up, one of my favorite family traditions was the annual sleepover my brother and I would have at my grandparents' house before the parade. Looking back now, I don't even recall the occasion for the parade. I have a vague sense of it happening in the spring. I just remember we'd have to get to bed early so we could wake up early the next morning, tagging along with my grandparents to the senior center. There, we'd fill our bellies with pancakes before heading over to watch the floats and the dancers and the big trucks and the high school band take to the streets of their small town. My grandparents had been in that town for decades, and it always amazed me—at the senior center, as we gathered with other spectators—that they could greet everyone we saw by name.

One of those years when my brother and I were teenagers—I don't remember the exact age, just that we were both sluggish in the mornings (and easily-embarrassable, which will matter later on in this story)—we were running behind. My grandma had gotten us to the senior center just as they were finishing serving, and she urged us to gobble up our pancakes quickly so we could head out to find a place from which to watch the parade.

"We've got to get a move on," she told my brother and me. "The sidewalks are filling up as we speak." My grandpa, who forever played the prankster, asked her slowly, "Ohhhhh, you think so?" I could see a twinkle in his eye and an idea forming in his head. "Of course!" she fussed at him, oblivious to his internal plotting. "You know if we stay here much longer, there won't be any place to put our chairs, and I know you don't want to stand for that whole thing. Let's go!"

She led the way, and the rest of us followed in line. It wasn't far from the senior center to the parade route, but my grandpa had trouble walking, so we hopped in the car for him to take us on the short drive. But he didn't turn left at the library, where we always parked, as was our parade day custom. He kept driving, and when my grandma started to panic ("Jack? Jack! Jack, what are you doing?!?!"), he laughed, and nudged the road barrier out of the way with the front of his long car, taking us right down the middle of the closed-off Main Street.

With my grandma alternately chiding him, turning back to check on us kids, and calling out to her friends at the curb, my grandpa cruised through the cordoned-off route, radio turned up, honking his horn, waving out the window at the crowds assembled for the parade that would start ten minutes later. The waiting attendees were delighted by this impromptu opening act, and several called out his name in recognition. My brother and I, mortified, sank low in the backseat, willing it to swallow us up.

I imagine Jesus gave a little more forethought to his parade than my grandpa gave to ours. But maybe not much. I wonder if inspiration just struck Jesus as he remembered Herod's parade, and felt the tension with the prophecy about the king coming humbly. I wonder how long it took Jesus to decide this was his moment to enact the story that stood in such stark contrast to the one being told by Herod's display. Is it possible the makeshift parade immortalized in these scriptures was both a serious critique of the empire and...a way to have a little fun?

Humor would have compounded the critique anyway. If there's anything a brutal regime must be, it's taken seriously. For Jesus to mock Herod's warhorses with his donkey; to undercut Herod's weapons with his palm branches; to silence Herod's armies with his singers and pray-ers, is for him to risk incurring even more of the wrath already headed his way.

But this street theater is also meant to show the residents of Jerusalem that they have options. They can cower before the powers that be, bowing in fear as Herod's parade passes by. Or they can join a gentler movement—one that urges them not to be afraid and invites them to imagine a more just and generous world.

The invitation to friends of Jesus long ago is still ours today: bring your palms, your signs of life, and lay them down; let them make a path we might all walk on toward our hope. Bring your prayers, your languages of hope, and lift them up; let them make a roof we might all find shelter and challenge under. Come, walk this way—join the throng for justice, the song for peace.

Reflection Questions

1. Do you think you would've laughed at Jesus' parade? Why, or why not?
2. Have you ever seen a public display of religion that moved you in some way? Can you recount that story?
3. If you were to create a "parade playlist," a soundtrack for a journey toward justice, peace, and love, what songs would you include?
4. What is compelling about a parade like Herod's? What would you liken it to today?
5. Jesus' parade ends in the temple, where he issues a challenge. If you were to create a parade route in your town, with the goal of the route concluding in a meaningful place, where would you make the route end? What would your challenge—or blessing—be for that destination?