

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
March 28, 2010
Luke 19:29-40
Parade Routes – A Palm Sunday Story

The centurion Octavius was the desk sergeant working the early shift for the Jerusalem police precinct. He scanned the reports from the prior day, looked at his calendar to verify that the Passover season had officially begun, and then shook his head in disgust. Next to the reports showing the daily-increasing number of visitors to the city was a stack of parade permits. As far as he could tell, Octavius estimated that there were five groups scheduled to march that day, and all due to converge at the same time at the same city gate across from the Mount of Olives. Things just didn't look good.

The first group and the most troubling in the bunch was the Judean People's Front. The sworn goal of these radical nationalists was to chase Octavius and every last Roman out of Jerusalem. Passover, with its repetition of the stories about release from slavery in Egypt long ago, was a perfect time to rattle sabers and foment insurrection among the masses. These Zealots would read their old prophecies about a coming Messiah, who would be David's heir to the throne, and how this King would be able to cast out the Roman oppressors once and for all. If violence broke out because of this group, Pilate would get a briefing ASAP and the Judean Homeland Security Office would put everyone on Code Red quicker than you could say "Et tu, Brute?".

The second group scheduled to parade was one Octavius always referred to as the "Me Party." This crowd of individualists was sick and tired of being told what to do by others, whether that meant the centurions in the Fortress or the high priests inside the temple. These people were an oxymoron – non-conformists whose non-conformity brought them together. They were always looking for something new and different but only on their own terms. They wanted to hear more about spirituality and less about religion; more about prosperity, less about discipline; more about protecting personal privileges, less about living together in harmony. They gave speeches and went to rallies all the time. Some of their leaders' books were flying off the shelves at Barnius & Noblus. But they were as unyielding in their demands as the Zealots were unyielding in their ideology. If these two groups ended up marching into each other, sparks would surely fly!

As Octavius studied the parade permits, he groaned because he remembered how the Passover season brought out the paparazzi as well... media vultures, trying to get a quote from a celebrity or pass on a slanderous bit of gossip. They were parasites drawn to mob scenes like wolves catching a whiff of blood on a summer's breeze. No matter what security details Octavius set in place, he could count on a bunch of gawkers clogging the sidewalks in hopes of seeing the latest superstar or witnessing firsthand a bit of street violence before it appeared on the evening news.

A second pair of opposing paraders was described on the next two forms. A group of peace activists was scheduled to march up the southeast road heading north. Tired of police state oppression and Roman centurions on every corner, this group hoped to convince people to follow a new way of life. Spears and swords were not the answer; armor was not the necessary accessory for people in a civilized society. One nation makes weapons to sell to someone else, who is then invaded by the weapon makers to destroy the very things sold to them. It was all quite pointless. This group wanted to march for peace, even if that led them into conflict with the powers that be. Hopefully a Prince of Peace would someday come to cancel the war games forever.

But on the very next permit, the patriotic front was scheduled to march on the northeast road heading south. For them, security issues were most important. As imperfect as the Roman government was, it had given them the chance to plant crops, raise their kids, and bring their sacrifices to the temple. Sure, no one liked taxes, but the peaceniks were naïve about how the world worked. Let the Romans do their jobs and secure the borders from immigrants who threaten everyone's prosperity, and let's rally 'round the flag, boys, knowing that God is on our side.

As he pictured the possible clashes along the parade routes, Octavius, a father with young kids, worried about the children. These holy days meant that kids would be out in full force. They loved parades and darting through the crowds – the good ones to dance and cheer, the bad ones to pick a few coin purses and harass the soldiers. They were so impressionable – one image good or bad might be all it took to determine an entire life path. Which drum major in the Passover parade would they follow?

Off to one side was a crumpled form Octavius had almost overlooked in the pile of paperwork. A Galilean rabbi was scheduled to enter the city from the east, accompanied by a group of his followers. No theme was listed for this entourage. But the rabbi's name rang a few bells for Octavius – Jesus of Nazareth. That miracle worker. The healer and teacher who was causing so much consternation among the leadership circles in the Jerusalem temple. Having no idea how this group would mix with all the others, Octavius decided to head over to the east gate to see everything for himself.

Moving to a position along the walkway at the top of the eastern wall, Octavius could hear the commotion long before he saw it. The Zealots were out in full force, just as the "Me Party" huddled a short distance away, deciding on an action plan for personal self-improvement. The peacemakers were chanting slogans and heading north, just as the flag-wavers were singing anthems and heading south. Paparazzi and peddlers, tourists and street children filled the streets and alleys of old Jerusalem. And as if into a perfect storm, the Galilean's followers were about to enter the fray, waving their palm branches and shouting "Hosanna."

Octavius watched as the groups began to take notice of one another. But before chaos erupted, the disciples of Jesus made their voices heard: "Hosanna! Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" The Zealots and patriots alike took note. A messianic ruler at last! They looked for branches to wave so they could join the chorus. Then came the next phrase: "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven." The peace activists felt their hearts soar and the "Me party" folk with their short attention spans were drawn to whatever looked to be the new populist trend. Children, attracted by the spectacle, followed in the parade's wake, and soon the noise was overwhelming. Octavius began to get nervous. He heard a Pharisee from the sidelines shout, "Rabbi, tell your disciples to disperse. Now!" Amid the noise and confusion, Jesus spoke the only words Octavius heard him say, something about if the people were silent, the stones themselves would cry out.

The cheering increased, but Jesus said nothing else. No stump speech either for or against the Romans. No sermon on how to improve your life or stop war or make things easier. The crowds followed along, hoping he'd toss out a slogan for their benefit, but this Jesus was clearly different. No war stallions; only a donkey. No bodyguards pushing away the rabble; instead he showed a willingness to touch the outstretched hand or tousele the hair of a passing child. He was different. He came to the crowd without becoming the crowd. He spoke of a truth without seeking to echo popular truths. It wasn't about them, and in many ways, it wasn't about him. It was about God, something bigger than any slogan or banner or party ideology.

As Jesus entered the city, something amazing happened. It was clear that you had to let something go in order to follow him. As slowly as Jesus was moving, it still meant people had to step out of their group and mix with others to follow him. They had to put down their placards, their demands, their self-righteousness, whatever it was, to fall in line behind him. No more "Me First" or "My Way or the Highway." No more "Us" vs. "Them." His presence took everyone's eyes off the present moment so they could finally glimpse eternity in all its mystery and hope and wonder.

Following Jesus was not easy. The streets were uneven; the space confining. You had to be aware of others even as they had to be aware of you. Yet suddenly, which crowd you belonged to no longer mattered. "Hosanna, God save us!" was everyone's cry. And in that moment, the prayer and the answer to the prayer came together.

At least it was that way for those intentionally close to Jesus. The people further back had ears but couldn't hear; had eyes but couldn't see. They just weren't ready to let go of what they'd brought with them that day. So, when one bumped someone else, soon shouts of anger were heard. Names were called. What Octavius feared now began to unfold, with the exception of the Galilean's group. They continued down the road, heading toward the temple, while behind them the mobs became, well, mobs.

It's true that a few folk did follow Jesus. A few Zealots found a new zeal. A few peace-lovers and nation-lovers discovered a higher, truer love. And children followed too; lots of children. The group passed out of Octavius' sight, as he braced to deal with the mess unfolding near the eastern gate. He longed to run after Jesus, to grab onto something he sensed was passing him by. He longed to drop who he was so he could discover, by God, who he was truly meant to be.

He could use some good news in his life. His week would only get worse. On Friday, he had to work the crucifixion detail.

AMEN