

Sit Up! **John 12:12-16**

Tanks vs a rotary tiller

My parents' hometown is in the northern part of South Korea. It's not in North Korea but close to the most heavily armed-demilitarized zone between North and South Korea. When I was a little kid, my parents took me and my brother to their small hometown surrounded by mountains almost every summer and I liked it. [ppt] I liked catching freshwater snails in creeks. Sometimes, my family spent the whole day in the water catching them, then my grandmother would boil the snails with soybean paste. We used a small needle to get the tiny piece of meat out of the shell, but it tasted really good! [ppt] My brother and I also enjoyed riding a rotary tiller. It was very loud and so slow that you could walk faster than this rotary tiller but I liked riding it with my uncle. There was another thing my brother and I really liked. When we sat in the living room of my grandparent's house, sometimes, we could hear rumbling sounds and feel the ground tremble. Can you guess what it was? It was military tanks. Because the town was so close to the border, there were many military bases, and sometimes, battle tanks moved around conducting drills. So, whenever we heard a rumbling sound, we rushed to the main road to see the tanks and wave our hands at the soldiers. To little kids, the massive size and the powerful sound of the tanks seemed magnificent. Battle tanks have often symbolized the military power of a nation.

Imagine that you hear news about parades in Washington D.C. on Independence Day. There will be two parades. One is a military parade. In that parade, a hundred tanks and armed vehicles will be present, and five thousand fully armed soldiers will march with a large flag and military banners. Of course, a military marching band will lead the parade. Sounds exciting! The other parade will be held on the opposite side of D.C. It's a small and voluntary parade so you don't know how big it will be. One thing you do know is that people will ride rotary tillers when they enter the city. Sounds exciting! Which parade do you want to see? Your answer may be dependent upon "who are they?" If the army marching to Washington D.C. on Independence Day is not the U.S. army but an invading army, would you still be excited to go to see the magnificent parade? Probably not. This is exactly what happened in Jerusalem two thousand years ago.

Two Parades

Today is Palm Sunday and it all starts with parades. New Testament scholar Marcus Borg points out that the Palm procession may have taken place on the same day or earlier than Pontius Pilate entering Jerusalem. Yes. There were two parades on Palm Sunday morning in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. One group marched to Jerusalem from the West while the other group marched from the East.

[ppt] Pontius Pilate mostly lived in his ocean palace in Caesarea Maritima but during the Passover, he made trips to Jerusalem along with his army. Of course, he wasn't doing this out of respect but his fear of rebellion. [ppt] As you can see on the screen, his army marched from the west toward the east on the road from Joppa. Early in the Morning, Pontius Pilate wore his glittering armor and rode his war horse and ceremonially marched into the city with his army. This military parade was an imperial procession to display the military might of the Roman empire and to warn people, "Don't even think about any uprising. You will be brutally crushed if we notice any signs of rebellion." What would the Israelites have felt when they saw Pontius Pilate marching along with his cavalry? What would they feel when they saw a legion, six thousand fully armed men marching into their capital city with Roman military banners? Fear,

humiliation, anger and despair. No matter how splendid the parade looked, I am pretty sure that no one would shout for joy.

On the other side of the city, Jesus and his disciples entered into Jerusalem. What did Jesus ride? A donkey's colt, which is a symbol of peace. Jesus sat on a donkey's colt and entered the city. A warhorse and a donkey's colt. Compared to Pontius Pilate's imperial procession, the palm procession was less impressive than the march of the Roman army, but there was something that Pontius Pilate's imperial procession didn't have. That was joyful shouts. Jesus' somewhat unimpressive entry to Jerusalem created a splendid welcoming. People took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!" This is a stark difference between Pilate's military procession and Jesus' palm procession. People were excited and the joyful shouts of the poor and the oppressed filled the air. The less impressive palm procession brought greater excitement, hope and joy to the city.

People never shouted, "save us!" to Pontius Pilate and his army even though the power they displayed seemed to be capable of doing anything. But people cried out "save us!" when they saw Jesus riding a donkey and entering Jerusalem. For those who sit up on a throne in high places, the message of the palm procession is very clear. There are greater powers than just military might, such as those displayed in Pilate's military procession. "Jesus demonstrated that a weaponless colt-riding rabbi surrounded by palm-waving people had more power than Pilate, Herod, and all the priests who clung to power in Jerusalem."

Sit Up!

We are the palm-waving people. We are the people who believe only Jesus Christ can truly save us and welcome him into our lives. We are people who believe, like those in his palm procession, that his way of non-violent protest against the unjust and oppressive powers of the world has greater power than any means of violence.

Sadly, we still see so many Pontius Pilates in the world today. They march all over the world with their armies, battle tanks, drones, missiles, and advanced war machines. Their march seems powerful and magnificent but their deadly march only brings destruction, sorrow, and fear. At the beginning of the sermon, I shared my childhood experience of excitement at seeing battle tanks rolling on the road, but no children and no people would be excited to see what a tank is used for, what it is built for. Children in Gaza are terrified when they hear the rumbling sounds of battle tanks rolling. Ukrainians were terrified when they saw Russian soldiers marching into their village. No matter how magnificent it may have looked, there was no joy or life in Pontius Pilate's march and it cannot save us.

Jesus Christ saves us. He has the power to save us and that's why we shout, "Hosanna, save us!" Of course, Jesus' way of peaceful protest against unjust power in the world is not an easy way. Have you ever thought about what Jesus might have felt sitting upright on the donkey and marching into Jerusalem? I cannot imagine how much courage Jesus had to have had to sit upright on that colt on Palm Sunday. He knew the cost of his procession against Pontius Pilate's military procession and speaking against those in power, but our Christ marched toward a place of conflict and suffering to save people. He walked a narrow path of love and peace. Our risen Christ still works to save people through those who follow his way.

With trust in Christ, many faithful people of God follow his way of peaceful protest, marching to challenge and change the world. I bet you know of Rosa Park. She is known for her pivotal role in the Montgomery bus boycott. She refused to give up her seat and sat upright on

her seat as a way of resisting the evil of racism. To stay sitting upright on her seat was itself a difficult thing to do. However, with courage, she sat upright and because she sat up, Martin Luther King Jr. could later march along with thousands of others for racial justice. Facing evil and injustice in our society is hard. Facing the suffering of people inflicted by unjust wars is hard and it hurts, especially when there is nothing we can do about it! So many people avoid them. Sometimes, all we can do is sit upright, honestly facing evils in our world. Maybe we can cry out 'Hosanna, save us!' That's o.k. With courage, which is a gift from God, we can swallow our fears and step forward or sit upright in facing radical evil in our society. That's a way of following our Christ.

I believe you have received a letter from the Council of Bishops, calling for a cease fire in Gaza. Please read the letter and pray for peace in Gaza as we move through passion week. We may want to stay away from this unsolvable issue, but sit upright, honestly face it and pray for people as our Christ sat upright and boldly marched against unjust power in the world. Sit upright to face it, that is enough.

At the beginning, I mentioned that while Pilate led the Roman army toward the East, Jesus and his followers moved from the East. This means that Pilate and his army set out towards Jerusalem, blinking in the rising morning sun. Despite the glorious and powerful appearance of the Roman Empire's army, they failed to see the sunlight shining directly from the direction where Jesus and his followers were coming, and those who followed Jesus walked in the light. We are the ones who walk in the light. With faith and courage, sit upright and continue following our Christ. Amen.