

When I was a junior in high school, our football team made a deep run into the state playoffs, and in the state semi-finals, we were to face Odessa Permian High School. If you know anything about Texas high school football, Odessa Permian was the inspiration behind the book, movie, and television series *Friday Night Lights*.

Although under the rules Permian could have selected a neutral site for the game, Permian decided they wanted to keep their home field advantage. They made us ride nearly 400 miles one way across the west Texas to play them in Odessa.

Permian's school colors are black, silver, and white. Their home uniforms are black pants with black jerseys and a white helmet, and most of their players wore black visors over their facemasks. When Permian took the field, they didn't burst through a paper banner; they slowly marched into the stadium to the Imperial Death March from the Star Wars, dressed from head to toe like an army of Darth Vaders. It was public theater, and the whole atmosphere in Odessa was designed to send a message – you are in our house now, so look ye on our works and despair.

I have yet to have the privilege of attending a game in person at Sanford Stadium, but I understand that it's one of the great home-field advantages not just in the SEC, but in all of college football. I understand that the pregame pomp and ceremony and ritual and

tradition is an integral part of the gameday experience.

Our story in Luke today reads like the entry of two teams into a stadium or two fighters into a ring. But it's not anywhere close to an even match.

On the one hand, we have Pontius Pilate. Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea, and Rome had issued him two standing orders: keep the peace by any means necessary, and keep the tax revenues rolling in. As long as those two things happened, Pilate was pretty much free to run his territory however he saw fit. But Jerusalem, high in the Judean hills was not Pilate's home field.

Pilate's palace was in Caesarea Maritima, a port city on the Mediterranean coast that Herod the Great had built from scratch years before to curry favor with the Roman Emperor. It had a proper Roman amphitheater, a proper Roman race track, and since it had no natural source of fresh water, Herod had seen to the construction of a Roman aqueduct to bring water down from the mountains. The Roman governor's palace was built overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, where from the veranda Pilate could watch ships disappear over the western horizon carrying treasure back to Rome. Caesarea Maritima was a little slice of Rome in a foreign land.

But every year, Pilate was forced to go to up to Jerusalem because of this Jewish holiday called Passover. Every

year, Jews from all over the world traveled to Jerusalem to mark a holiday that commemorated the occasion when their God apparently miraculously delivered them from slavery in Egypt and destroyed the Egyptian army by casting their chariots and riders into the sea.

As the senior Roman official in the region, charged with preserving Roman national interests, it was vital that Pilate have a visible security presence in Jerusalem, so as much as he hated it, every year he went up to Jerusalem. There were always some problems here and there, but once the trouble makers were hung on Roman crosses along the main road, the Jews always got the message.

When Pilate went up to Jerusalem, he traveled in full military parade – banners unfurled, troops marching in perfect step, swords and spears shined at the ready. Pilate entered the city from the west, coming up the road from Caesarea Maritima, and when he entered Jerusalem, the trumpeters heralded his arrival, and then Pilate himself came in, sitting high on an armored stallion. The message to all who would oppose Rome was unmistakable – look ye on our works and despair.

But just as Pilate's parade was approaching Jerusalem from the west, up from the coast, another procession was approaching Jerusalem from the east, up from Jericho. This procession

was not made up of battle-hardened soldiers, but children, and the very young, and the very old, the curious and the cynical alike. They did not march in lockstep, but rather flowed and ebbed through the streets like a living, breathing thing. They did not shout, "Make way, hail Caesar!" but rather, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" They carried no weapons, but some waved palm branches, and others took their coats and spread them on the road.

The leader of this procession wore no armor, and he, too, carried no weapons. He sat not astride a muscular, armored stallion, but a donkey, braying and kicking and jerking and hee-hawing its way through the crowd.

And when the little procession arrived at the Mount of Olives, he looked out at the city on the other side of the Kidron Valley, and his heart broke, and tears streaked down his face. And he said, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!"

Two parades, approaching the city, one from the west, one from the east. One brandishing spears and swords. One waving palm branches and cloaks. One led by a governor riding astride a stallion. One led by a simple carpenter, riding astride a donkey. One who hates Jerusalem and everything it stands for. One whose heart is broken

for it. And very, very soon, the two will come face to face.

I'd like to think that if I had been there, I would have joined the parade of palms. But in truth, I would have been more impressed with Pilate's parade. I think we are often drawn to displays of power and dominance, particularly if we benefit from the exercise of that power and dominance. That's not a new phenomenon. Pilate was not the first leader to go parading around showing off weapons of war and celebrating violence, nor will he be the last. Authoritarianism is nothing new. Empires have come and gone throughout human history.

But this Jesus guy is different, isn't he? I mean, his parade is ridiculous. I imagine that the average Roman soldier pulling extra security duty in Jerusalem probably took one look at this rag tag group and said, "This is why we're on high alert? For this guy? I think we can take him."

And here's a spoiler alert. They will. They'll take him. And they'll beat him. And they'll mock him. And they'll crucify him like a common criminal. And they'll bury him.

But here's the scandal of the gospel. It won't work. Because it turns out that love is still stronger than hate. It turns out that goodness is still stronger than evil. It turns out that nonviolence and a commitment to love and pray for one's enemies can stymie

and frustrate the plans of even the most powerful of empires. Here's the scandal and the paradox of the gospel. The path to ultimate victory is not through fighting, but rather complete surrender of our will and the care of our lives to Christ Jesus, who loves us so much it hurts.

Sometime this week, maybe today, maybe tomorrow, but certainly before we're gathered here again, you're going to be presented with a choice to make about which parade you will join. Maybe it will happen in your school. Maybe in your office. Maybe in your home. Maybe in a public place. But you will be presented with a clear choice to make.

On the one hand, you can fall in line with the parade of power and dominance:

The parade where mercy is only for the weak.

The parade where might makes right, and look out for number one.

The parade where the only way to make peace is with the point of a spear.

Or, on the other hand, you can fall in behind this ridiculous rabbi on this ridiculous donkey. You can choose to join the parade of gospel foolishness:

The parade that lampoons and resists the fallen powers and principalities of this present darkness.

The parade where there's room for both Pharisees and prostitutes, both centurions and tax collectors, both us and those people, too.

the parade that lays down coats and privilege at the feet of Jesus.

The parade that doesn't so much march as much as it dances behind the King of Kings, the Prince of Peace, the One who was and is and is to come.

Beware, though. Because when that moment comes, the pull to fall in line behind the parade of the powers that be will be incredibly strong. It's so strong that it can cause the same people who shouted "Hosanna!" and waved Palm Branches on Sunday to cry out "Crucify him!" by Friday.

So don't forget that we're in this thing together. Don't think for a second that you have to go it alone. Don't forget that we are the body of Christ, and individually, members of it. Don't forget who and whose you are, who and whose we are. Don't forget that we are the church, and though the very gates of hell itself should come against us, as long as we dance with Jesus, we shall not fall.

As we fall in behind Jesus this morning, as we dance and sing our way into this Holy Week, as we encounter once again the Table, the Cross, and the Tomb, may we go proclaiming the king who comes in the name of the Lord.

Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!

Amen.