

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C:
“The Procession to Jerusalem”

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Reflections on **Is 66:18-21; Heb 12:5-7, 11-13; and Luke 13:22-30**

My two sons went to Notre Dame School, so for years our family attended Mass at Our Lady of Sorrows. I remember experiencing a sense of excitement when it was time to move to the center aisle and join the Communion procession. It was the most active participation we were allowed during Mass. We stood up and we walked! We made a personal statement – one word, Amen.

I liked being part of the procession, part of the assembly taking personal and communal action. Well, for those of us who like participating in processions, today is our day. Procession is the planned activity in today's scripture. There is the procession recorded in Isaiah and the processional journey of which Luke writes. And all roads lead – not to Rome – but to Jerusalem, into the presence of God.

The Isaiah procession has a certain electricity to it. Yahweh declares, “I am going to gather the nations of *every* language.” This is not just the chosen few, no longer only the Israelites - *everyone* is included. And they come. What a sight this procession is! They come in their chariots and carts, on their horses, mules and camels. There is excitement and importance in all that activity. And it *is* important. Yahweh is spreading the word. These are the people from far away nations who have yet to hear of or experience the power and glory of God. They are more than welcome in this procession; Yahweh *expects* them to show up in Jerusalem.

They shall come to Jerusalem, into the presence of God.

I wish we had more processions similar to this – maybe not the mules and camels, but the people coming from all directions to witness God's glory. When I was a child, I remember when the church bell rang out every Sunday morning in our neighborhood in Cincinnati. The bells called us to Mass, and we came from every direction. It was still happening like that when I was a student at Notre Dame in the late 1980's. The church bells broke the silence of Sunday morning and called all of us, from the dorms that circle the campus, from North Dining Hall and South Dining Hall, from farther away places like the priests' home up on the hill, the students deep in the stacks of the library, from the path out around the lakes, from the surrounding neighborhoods where the professors came with their families. Just as in Isaiah, everyone answered the call and hurried from all directions to experience the glory of God.

Something interesting emerges about these processions. In all three cases, Isaiah's story of Yahweh's calling, the bells pealing on the campus of Notre Dame and at St. Gregory's church in Cincinnati – whether the people knew one another, spoke the same language, were young or old, wealthy or just getting by, feeble or robust – for that moment, they were all the same; each procession created a community with the common denominator of being called into the presence of God. Just as our gracious God is the common denominator for us today—

in *this* space / at *this* moment. We have come together today, even from the far away land of Seattle and Simi Valley to be together with God and the God in one another.

Luke writes of a very different kind of procession. It is a slow procession, with crowds joining in as Jesus is “making his way” to Jerusalem.” That’s the phrase, “Making his way.” It sounds hard, it sounds like a procession of serious purpose, as if Jesus were trudging towards Jerusalem. Jesus knows he is “making his way” to his death. But he still has work to do to complete his mission. He has more to teach us, more parables to tell us, more questions to answer from the crowds that follow him, before his work on Earth is completed. It echoes the feeling of the Robert Frost poem,

But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

The parable we hear today is about that nasty little narrow door. The story brings me to only one conclusion: it’s hard to get to heaven. We can’t take our eternal life with God for granted. We also have work to do.

Jesus goes right at it with his challenge: “*Try* to get through the narrow door.” Then the good news that, “*Many* will *not* succeed.” And he is relentless: the door is locked; “I don’t know you,” he says, “get away from me, you evildoers.” Then the deepest blow of all, the one that causes wailing and grinding of teeth—standing on the outside and looking in to see all those who are safe inside God’s house. I would see all you guys. There’s Lynn, no longer needing glasses, Christine walking around her private parking lot trying to decide which car to use today, and Harriet leading a small group discussion on the spiritual dimensions of narrow doors.

When I was about 35 years old and a young mom, one of my son’s teachers asked me if I thought it was hard to be a good Catholic. Her answer was yes, but, in my naiveté, I said no. Not my answer now. It is hard work to die to self and to walk through that narrow door. It is

hard to get through that narrow door when we’re so burdened with privilege. How *do* we behave as Christians in the face of war and hunger and poverty and ignorance, and sickness that gets no attention, and children in jail, and abuse of the defenseless? Anthony Padavano answers with these words: “We shall become Christians on that morning when we laugh and sing for the right reasons and when we weep not because we have lost something, but because we were given so much.”

Christ invites us to join the procession to Jerusalem, a procession that asks much of us, asks us to join Jesus in suffering, and to rid ourselves of the privilege and self-interest that keep us from following Jesus through the narrow door. Scripture scholars have various interpretations of Luke’s final lines: “Some who are last will be first, and some who are first will be last.” To me, this says that our work is to create equality in *our* hearts ... to see ourselves as one with the veteran who will never be able to think clearly again, as one with the tattered dirty, smelly man foraging in the trash, as one with the addict who sits on the corner with a blank stare and a brown bag in his hand. All of us, equally God’s beloved. The changing of a human heart is a miracle, indeed, may be the *only* miracle. God calls us to be miracle makers within our own hearts.

Joan Chittister tells us that we live in “a world whose name is despair.” But we have chosen hope. We are people who have chosen a new way, a revolutionary way. We are people of the Beatitudes. We have chosen to believe that the faith which we were so lovingly given, the faith that sustains us in the most sad and fearful of times, will lead us to places where hope can conquer despair.

We have work to do to get through that narrow door. We enter the procession and we undertake the journey because we must, and because we *are* people of the Beatitudes, on the road to becoming miracle makers.

Amen.