

THE PARADOX OF PALM SUNDAY

12 The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³ So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!' ¹⁴ Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: ¹⁵ 'Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!' ¹⁶ His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. (John 12:12-16, NRSV)

During my years as a minister, I've seen and done a lot of things during church that I didn't expect to see or do. There was the time I forgot about the steps leading up to the pulpit, and tripped into a giant leap across the chancel on my way down. There was the time a bird flew into the sanctuary right when I started to preach. Twice I've had bridesmaids faint during weddings, and then there was the time in Boston that I watched a donkey being pushed and pulled down a sanctuary aisle.

When I was a student at Boston University, Colleen and I worked in a Methodist church. And this church had a tradition, every Palm Sunday, of marching a donkey down its aisle. It was supposed to be this great visual reminder of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The day started out early, when members from all of the churches in our part of town gathered together for a procession that went to each church. We kind of made spectacles of ourselves, waving palm branches, singing hymns, and

marching through town behind a petting zoo donkey, but it was tradition, and I didn't ask questions.

Earlier in the week, our Senior Minister, Ed, had assured me that a donkey had successfully made the trip down the aisle for many years without incident. The trick, he said, was to keep the animal moving. And so, that morning, as on every other Palm Sunday, our minister began pulling the donkey down the sanctuary aisle right as the organ music began. Ed was doing a pretty good job of looking dignified while guiding the animal when about half way down the aisle it decided to stop. Ed's eyes grew and his eyebrows arched and he began pulling the donkey's rope with all his might. It was minister versus beast, and the beast was winning. Of course, throughout this whole thing, everyone in the church just kept singing "All Glory Laud and Honor" as our poor minister planted his feet and pulled.

Suddenly Bob, the chair of the Board of Trustees, hopped out of his pew and began pushing the donkey from behind. All I could think was, "Bob, you are either mighty brave *or* mighty foolish." With the congregation singing, Ed pulling, and Bob pushing, the donkey decided maybe he'd just sit down, or try to anyway. Without moving its legs the donkey began moving as the carpet buckled under its weight. And so, our grand procession ended with Ed and Bob somehow sliding that poor donkey the rest of the way up the aisle and out the side door just in the nick of time. It was the craziest Palm Sunday I've ever experienced, with the only real casualties being Ed's back, and Ed's ego.

The original Palm Sunday 2,000 years ago had its own sense of madness and mayhem, paradox and contradiction. Jesus had choices, just like us, so why in the world did he agree to such a procession in the first place? After all, he'd already had clashes with the religious leaders and raised the eyebrows of the ruling Romans. If it had been

me, I would have probably avoided Jerusalem altogether. And if I had decided to enter, I would have slipped in after dark, hopefully unnoticed. Not Jesus. As Rev. Gary Smith put it, “Jesus chooses instead to ride right into the city where his enemies await, where all the powers and principalities are primed to destroy him, frame him, eliminate him, get him out of the way. It’s a conscious choice he makes, it’s a courageous choice” (<http://www.firstparish.org/sermons/2001-04-08.html>).

I’ll bet there was a mixture of emotions that memorable day. Joy and sorrow, jubilation and despair mingled together with the waving palm branches and chanting crowds. The spectators must have felt happy, hopeful, excited. The famous Rabbi Jesus was riding into town: The man who had proven himself a mighty teacher, prophet, and healer. Some people thought he might be the Messiah, the Christ, God’s Chosen One. Some hoped he’d lead them out of Roman Oppression, like a modern day Moses, and restore the monarchy, like a modern day David.

There was a sense of excitement in the air because everyone was coming to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, the biggest holiday of the year. The city brimmed with people and overflowed with high hopes that maybe this year God’s promised Deliverer would come. We can hear it in the words they chanted. “Hosanna,” they cried out. “Hosanna to the Son of David.” The word “hosanna” came from a Hebrew word that was used in several Psalms and it meant, “Save now” (*The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 2, William Barclay, p. 239*). “Son of David” referred to Jesus following in David’s footsteps, as well as his being a direct descendant of David. “Hosanna to the Son of David,” “Save us now, Son of David.” In essence, they were crying out, “Save us now from our Roman oppressors. Save us now from being a has-been nation. Save us now and put us back on the map as God’s chosen people.” Their words reflect their hopes, but

they also speak of deep sorrows, deep wounds in the psyche of the nation and the daily lives of the people. They needed help, and they knew it. So they placed their hearts and their hopes in the hands of this man.

For Jesus, this parade must have been a mixture of hope and hopelessness as well. Maybe he thought about the potential of all these people really understanding his message and mission. Maybe he imagined how different Jerusalem would be if people started following God's way of love. But alongside that, I think he must have felt a sense of doom and dread.

Jesus entered into Jerusalem knowing the track record of the prophets who'd preceded him, and knowing that his claim was much more radical than theirs ever were. He went knowing the unpredictable nature of any crowd and the fickleness of the human heart. He went knowing that his old enemies from the religious establishment would hear of his entrance into the city and would be keeping close tabs on him. He knew all of this, but he went anyway. And when he did, he was welcomed by the crowd waving their palm branches, singing psalms, and laying their cloaks on the road as a red carpet before him (Barclay, p. 239). It was a royal treatment.

How did the people expect Jesus to arrive in town? Did they picture him charging in on a white horse, ready to lead them to military victory? What must they have thought when they saw him perched on a humble donkey, as a sign that he came in peace? (Ibid. p.243). How did Jesus compare to popular expectations? How did this Sunday parade turn into a Friday death march? Clearly as the week wore on, when Jesus spent time teaching in the Temple instead of plotting a military coup, the people began to grumble. As he showed no interest in ruling on a human throne, but rather in the human heart, the people began to

seethe. As he showed no interest in an earthly kingdom but instead in the Kingdom of Heaven, their anger reached a boiling point.

Of course, it wasn't just the people. Jesus had been having run-ins with the Pharisees for several years, and they were happy to make his life difficult. Shortly after entering Jerusalem, Jesus once more angered the religious establishment by driving out the Temple's moneychangers, and the people who sold animal sacrifices. Suddenly he wasn't just a pain in the neck, but a pain in the pocketbook. They didn't like his views of the law and they didn't like the way he talked so personally about God, as if he had the inside track. They didn't like the threat he posed to their own established authority. So throughout this week we call "holy," the religious leaders worked to eliminate the Holy One himself. Palm Sunday's hosannas gave way to a Roman cross.

This is the paradox of Palm Sunday, which is also called Passion Sunday. According to Rev. Diana Shaw, "Many churches around the world this day will read or reenact the drama of the passion; the account of [Christ's] betrayal and death. This is the dark side with its almost unbearable anguish and pathos where instead of standing along the road shouting 'Hosanna, Hosanna!' we very well could be found yelling 'Crucify, crucify!'" ...Two moods. Two sentiments. Two attitudes. They jangle together and they are out of sync. In the beginning the people are enthusiastic. 'Hosanna!' King. Flowers. Trumpet blasts. Nervous animals. Dancing children. Cloaks. Colors. Purple. In the end, he is hanging on a cross. 'Away with him.' There is the dark smell of blood on the earth."

<http://danenet.danenet.org/firstucc/srm032899.html>

Palm Sunday leads to Good Friday. It's a journey we take every year. And yet we choose to celebrate. We celebrate with palms and children singing. We join in the parade, while knowing what lies ahead. Because no matter where our journey takes us, we know we're never alone. We know who travels with us. We know our ultimate destination. May you sense God's presence this blessed Holy Week, and may we celebrate God's love in all that we say and do. AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only

Edited by Colleen Brown Only

Palm Sunday

April 4, 2004

The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God, on this Palm Sunday, we recall the shouts of glad hosannas with which the people greeted Jesus. And yet he was not the kind of messiah they were looking for. They wanted an earthly king, yet Jesus took the form of a servant. They were looking for a swashbuckling warrior, yet Jesus praised the peacemakers. They were looking for someone who would cater to the high and mighty, yet Jesus ministered to the lowly and outcast. We confess that sometimes Jesus doesn't fit our expectations either, that following his way of love is often difficult and inconvenient. Challenge us to follow Jesus closely this week through Communion on Maundy Thursday. Encourage us not to forsake him, not to look away when it seems like the end of the world on Good Friday. And then bring us back to you rejoicing on Easter Sunday.

Through Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.

Part of this prayer was adapted from *Litanies and Other Prayers*, by Phyllis Cole and Everett Tilson, p. 64.