

This Little Parade A Palm Sunday Sermon and Poem
March 25, 2018 Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Bill Chadwick Matthew 21:1-11

“In your Easter bonnet, with all the frills upon it,
You’ll be the grandest lady in the Easter Parade...”

Easter parades with frilly bonnets and lacey dresses in bright spring colors.

Easter parades are very different from this first Palm Sunday parade. No, this Palm Sunday parade has much more in common with yesterday’s March for Our Lives for commonsense gun control. It was ordinary people standing up to forces of violence and of greed, employing power from within to confront the forces of power.

Let’s walk our way through this Palm Sunday parade.

Jesus does not find himself in Jerusalem at this time by accident. Throughout the gospel narrative we see Jesus in control. Nothing haphazard or spontaneous. He decides where he goes and when. For some months he has known that in Jerusalem there is a price on his head, knows that when he shows up in the Holy City he will be in grave trouble. For a while he stays away, not because he is afraid, but because the timing is not right. Finally, he discerns, as a result of his constant communion with God, that the time has come. As Luke puts it, “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.”

Isn’t that a wonderful phrase, “set his face”? It is a Hebraism meaning “he made up his mind;” he steeled himself to do what is right, no matter what.

Sometimes in life we are called to set our faces, to make the difficult decision, to follow where God leads, to stay up and finish that homework assignment, to not cheat even though the other kids are, to spend time with that annoying relative, to have that hard conversation with a friend, to refrain from that affair, to do the right thing at work even though it will negatively affect the bottom line. Followers of Jesus know that the financial bottom line is not the *true* bottom line. For the followers of Jesus, the bottom line is doing the right thing.

Sometimes faithfulness to God requires us to make hard decisions, to go down difficult paths. But in the long run, those will be paths that lead to meaning and joy.

Jesus “set his face.” He was faithful. And God was faithful to him.

Second. Jesus required help.

“Go into the next town and you will find a donkey.” It was all arranged. Jesus sent two of his disciples. Which two? Matthew doesn’t tell us, but Thomas Long thinks it might well have been James and John. These brothers had earned themselves the nickname “The Sons of Thunder,” and only shortly before they had been arguing over which positions of authority might be granted them when Jesus came into power: who was going to be vice-messiah and who was going to be Secretary of State. They were jockeying over positions of power and prestige, but then Jesus sends them on donkey detail.

Jesus said, “Whoever among you who would be greatest, must be servant of all.”

As to the donkey, “The Lord has need of it.” As to you and me, “The Lord has need of us.” What does Jesus need you and me to do today? That’s a good question to ask in our morning devotions. “What do you need me to do today, Jesus?”

Third. Jesus was deliberately enacting the role of a king within the Israelite tradition. In one version of the gospels, it says that Jesus rode into town on “a colt that has never been ridden.” Scholars suggest that this may...be related to the Rabbinic Mishnah instruction that “no one may use an animal on which a king rides” Evans, *TLC*, p. 267). In other words, Jesus is assuming a kingly prerogative by riding a colt that has never been ridden.

And, of course, he rode a donkey, not a charger. It has often been noted that when a king rode into town he might indeed, ride in on a donkey, if he is coming in peace, but a warhorse if coming to conquer.

Jesus is not bashful about asserting his place. He is deliberately claiming to be the Messiah. When the Jewish authorities tell him to shut up his followers, he says, “If they were silent, the very stones would shout.”

Some people acknowledge him. Some don't.

Will we recognize Jesus as truly Lord of our lives? Which means, of course, that if Jesus is Lord, then we are not. It means relinquishing control.

Who is in control of our lives? That's the crux of the matter.

Crux, of course, is Latin for cross (crucifixion). Are we truly willing to declare Jesus King of our Lives, even when things get tough?

The Biblical writers, when they had something *really* important to say would use poetry. Let me finish with a poem I wrote a few years back.

Boys getting lost and mothers calling,
 Men cursing at donkeys stalling.
 Sacrificial lambs bleating.
 Each pilgrim's pulse beating
 quicker now,
 Remembering the tale of that night long ago
 when the angel spared the Jews' first-born
 while all around them Egypt mourned.
 How terrifying must have been that flight
 to the banks of the Sea of Reeds.
 More awesome still the display of might
 in yet another of God's deeds!
 Parting of the waters
 for Israel's sons and daughters.
 The story burns within them as journeying now
 from near and far, from west and east
 trudging on foot, riding on beasts
 for the experience of a lifetime,
 the holiest of feasts:
 Passover in Jerusalem!
 These hordes of humanity *always* caused tension
 But this year something more could be sensed in the air
 As eyebrows and whispers debated the question,
 "Would Jesus the Galilean dare to be there?" ...

Rather “Jesus the Outlaw,” with a price on his head,
 For raising Lazarus from the dead
 was too disturbing and dangerous a fact
 for the Sanhedrim any longer to stay out of the act.

Who is this Jesus?
 Does he really cause the blind to see and the sick to heal?
 Can he truly cast out demons?
 Are these stories real?
 You don’t suppose...
 It couldn’t be...
 Some are saying...
 Do you really think that he...?

“Hosanna! God save us!”

Shouts and commotion!
 Jesus *is* here!
 Riding a donkey, right out in the open!
 Now a fact well known to every good Jew
 Was that prophets used symbols when words didn’t get through
 And this bold action—straight from Zechariah—
 An obvious claim: “I am the Messiah!”
 The donkey was symbol of ruler and king
 all the way back to Solomon’s crowning.
 But since also the sign of one coming in peace
 this must *not* be a challenge to the Roman police.

No, the centurion reporting to Pilate that night
 was more accurate than he ever could dream
 in surmising,
 “This little parade was harmless...
 or dangerous in the extreme.”

Twenty centuries later we now understand.
 It was the final appeal by the Man.
 An offer which right now His Spirit imparts
 not to be king of a nation
 but Lord of our hearts.