

**Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL**  
**Palm Sunday April 13, 2014**

**Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell**

**Text—Matthew 21: 1-11 (12-17)**

There are parades—and there are parades:

- There are “ticker tape” parades for heroes or for great accomplishments—the first man on the moon, say; the Blackhawks after winning the Stanley Cup; the Cubs after winning the World Series (well, maybe not).
- There are parades for recurring holidays. They come with themes—Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade that starts off the holiday season; every town’s Fourth of July parade celebrating freedom (and often accompanied by all manner of politicians); and in places like Galena, the Halloween parade.

These parades usually have bands and floats and banners, an air of celebration and excitement.

- Then there are the parades that are more like walks. They bring attention to some specific thing—breast cancer, gun violence, peace. Some of these are huge, with thousands and thousands walking and raising tons of money. Some are tiny, like our friend Lou Ness walking to our nation’s capital on behalf of the hungry and homeless, simply carrying the cries and the stories.
- And then, there are the frightful parades like those seen in old news reels of Nazi Germany, but more recently in places like Russia and North Korea—rank after rank of marching soldiers, weapons: tanks and cannons or their modern equivalent; a display of power, meant to intimidate and control.

How would we characterize this parade of Jesus? This “multitude” laying cloaks on the dusty road as if for royalty, ripping branches off trees, and waving them while shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David.” Hosanna. All this for a raggedy procession of disciples, followers, and onlookers surrounding a man who rode on the back of a young donkey down the path from the Mount of Olives and through the Golden Gate into Jerusalem. Were they acclaiming a hero—a teacher and healer, a miracle worker, a prophet—or were they just caught up in the exuberance of the day or the “crowd think?”

We traditionally observe this day, of course, as a happy one—think of “Jesus Christ, Superstar”—a triumphant entry of a king into Jerusalem. It's Eve subtitled "Triumphal Entry" in some of our Bibles and is the theme of our hymns. It is the beginning of a week that will end in horror—and then, a joyous celebration. In recent years, we have observed Palm/Passion Sunday, turning very quickly from the palm-waving parade to the other one, the exhausted, beaten man bearing his cross to the hill of Golgotha. We have done that so that those who do not participate in other Holy Week liturgies will not leap from celebration to celebration, missing the full spiritual experience of Holy Week.

That is why your Worship Committee decided to focus on the Palms today and last year, leaving the Passion until Thursday and Friday. But even so, we miss so much if this story. Now we leap from the palms to the Last Supper. What about the days in between? Jesus and his disciples did not just party in Bethany with Martha, Mary, and Lazarus until it was time for the Passover. No, there was much more to the story.

So, again I ask, how would we describe this Palm Sunday parade? Was it a triumphant entry. No doubt it was for many of the people. But what if it was not that—or at least not *only* that? Think about it—and about all that was happening in Jerusalem in those days leading up to Passover.

Passover is a major Jewish festival, so people came from miles around to the Temple to celebrate the remembrance of Moses leading the people out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land, to freedom where they could be a people. This is their foundational story.

And yet, in Jesus' time, the reality did not look like freedom. They were a people occupied by the powerful Roman Empire, tolerated so long as they did not cause trouble. Roman authorities knew that this week could be dicey—the sheer numbers of people swarming into the city. But also the potential for unrest—a political tinderbox that could be set into flames by just a few zealots. So, they sent in the “peacekeeping troops”—lots of troops, led by the governor, Pontius Pilate.

We can imagine Jesus on his donkey, surrounded by the palm-waving throng entering the city gate at the East of the city, from Bethany and Jericho while at the same time another procession made its way through the Damascus gate across the city. This one, the Roman forces, mounted not on donkeys but on magnificent war horses, their helmets shining, their armor and their swords displaying power.

Now, these processions did not meet in the middle. As far as we know. But perhaps some people saw them both. Think of the contrast! Maybe that is what prompted the question about Jesus, “Who is this?” Maybe some asked what he was doing.

What if the palm procession was a carefully planned and choreographed bit of street drama, a political statement proclaiming a kingdom far different from that of Rome or any other oppressive regime? What if Jesus was not smiling and waving at the crowd like a rock star, but metaphorically—forgive my crudeness—flipping them the bird, mocking the Roman powers. A Stephen Colbert or Jon Stewart shining the light of satire on the Emperor's new clothes. Telling the truth.

Look at the symbolism. This story, told in all four gospels, draws clear connections with prophecies and beliefs from the Hebrew scriptures. It is the prophet Zechariah who Matthew quotes here: the one who will save Israel, the king, will arrive humbly on a donkey—a beast of burden, not the mount of most kings. The path he uses and the gate through which he rides is symbolic, too. The Golden Gate, now sealed, was thought to be the gate through which the Shekinah, the Presence of God, entered each Shabbat. And this would be the gate through which the Messiah would come on the way from the Mount of Olives.

One thing I've often wondered. Why? Why at this particular time? If Jesus was making such an impact in his ministry, why did he have to risk it after only three years? Why not five years, or ten?

Think of all the good he could accomplish!

I don't have an answer. Just that maybe the time was ripe. Maybe things had heated up so much that he had to act right then or lose the chance—fully aware of the risk to himself, fully willing to spend his very life to so powerfully reveal another way—a way of truth and life.

And so, the drama unfolded in these next days. Jesus moves back and forth from Jerusalem where he annoys just about everyone to Bethany where he can relax a bit with his good, good friends—and even, according to Matthew, be anointed for his burial by Mary. For his procession has gotten the attention of the Romans—he is just what they don't want at Passover. And he will further upset the Temple authorities as he overturns the tables in the courtyard and then conducts a marathon of preaching and teaching his radical and subversive parables. And somewhere along the line, the people will change. It is no wonder, really. Their expectations, their hopes, are smashed to bits. The Son of David should be a King and warrior, like David himself. A conqueror, defeating the oppressors and ushering in that peaceful kingdom. NOW.

So, when the crowd turns, when Judas accepts the bribe to betray Jesus, when the disciples disappear and Peter denies and the cock crows, Good Friday does not come as such a surprise.

Jesus simply practiced what he preached, a love for God's people **even unto death**.

Resolutely confronting the powers without hesitation. Revealing humbly, nonviolently, lovingly, a kingdom beyond measure. One that is here right now. Today. For you. For me. For all of God's beloved. That is our foundational story, our hope and promise. Will you claim this kingdom, this love? Will you walk the path this week?

Amen.

Oh, about that donkey. G.K. Chesterton has something to say about its lowly status in his poem cleverly called "The Donkey."

When fishes flew and forests walked  
And figs grew upon thorn,  
Some moment when the moon was blood  
Then surely I was born.

With monstrous head and sickening cry  
And ears like errant wings,  
The devil's walking parody  
On all four-footed things.

The tattered outlaw of the earth,  
Of ancient crooked will;  
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,  
I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour;  
One far fierce hour and sweet:  
There was a shout about my ears,  
And palms before my feet.

Source: The Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton (Dodd Mead & Company, 1927)