

## **"Lowly and Humble, Exalted and Glorified"**

Isaiah 50:4-9a; John 12:12-16

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus, Ohio

April 9, 2017 – Palm Sunday– Rev. Ronald Botts

Everyone loves a parade. They stir up a sense of excitement in us. They announce that something special is about to happen. So then, why should we be surprised that Jesus entered into Jerusalem as part of a parade. Actually, he was the parade—he and the donkey on which he rode.

Now it might seem strange that the Messiah, this King of Glory, would choose to make his triumphal entry in such a common and undistinguished way. After all, why not select something more fitting, like a gilded chariot pulled by a team of white horses? Wouldn't that be more in keeping with his importance than sitting on the back of a lowly animal?

Important people today do not make that sort of mistake. If you're anybody in Hollywood, you pull up at the Oscars in a Rolls Royce. Your grand arrival reveals to everyone just how great a person you are. When you alight, people ooh and aaah at the impeccable cut of your tuxedo or the glistening sequins on your gown. This entrance is a far cry, however, from how Christ came into his city.

Jesus' choice of animal was quite intentional. This was not by chance. It fulfilled an ancient prophecy in Zechariah where it says, "Here comes your King, triumphant and victorious, riding humbly on a donkey, on the foal of a donkey!... He shall command peace to the nations. His dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the Euphrates to the ends of the earth."

While these words of scripture were certainly familiar to the people, they didn't represent the common vision of one to come. The people were looking for a Messiah who would restore the fortunes of Israel. The popular image was that of a worldly king, but greater and stronger and more successful than any who had been known before. For that kind of monarch, Jesus did not fit the description.

Instead, Jesus found his definition in Zechariah and especially in Isaiah. He heard words of prophesy and saw them pointing directly to him. "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low; the uneven ground shall be made level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'"

This carpenter's son knew that other passages were also speaking of him. "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street...he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching."

Humanity's Savior would also be one whose destiny was to serve, rather than be served. His way would be marked by suffering rather than the comfort of luxury. Again from Isaiah: "Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity... Surely he has borne our infirmities... he was wounded for our transgressions...."

Our first scripture today echoes this same suffering when it describes the insult and physical submission he must endure, but it also indicates this will not be his downfall: "The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near... It is the Lord God who helps me...."

Jesus is truly one who emptied himself by taking the form of a servant. He rid himself of pride, self-centeredness, personal gain, and all distractions to focus simply on who he was and what he was called to do. Prayer by prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane he put aside each temptation, each false security, until he was able to say, "Not my will but yours be done."

Can we hear again this well-known story of Palm Sunday, only this year with new ears and fresh awareness?

A Zen Master once invited a student over for afternoon tea. He was concerned because this young man had much promise but his progress was exceedingly slow. They talked while the tea leaves brewed, then the master poured the tea into the student's cup. Yet even after the cup was full, he continued pouring. Soon the tea overflowed and spilled out over the table, and then down onto the floor.

"Master, master, you must stop pouring. The tea is completely overflowing. No more is going into the cup. It's being wasted and creating a mess."

"Very observant," said the old teacher as he smiled and nodded with approval. "And the same can be said of you. If you are to take in my teachings, you must first empty out what you have in your cup already, which is your mind. You must rid yourself of much of what you have learned in life, of the wisdom that the world teaches you, so that there will be room for new ideas."

The master continued: "The old, which was first, does not give way readily to the new. Your cup, my son, is already full and it rejects whatever I try to offer you. My efforts are spilled and wasted like the tea, and you only seem to become more and more confused. For the next month I will relieve you of all your studies, save one: that you contemplate this lesson of the tea. Then, perhaps, you will be ready and able to learn."

Our lives, too, can get filled up with this and that and the other. There's so much already inside us that our capacity may seem to be limited. Our receptivity to new information, new ideas, new approaches to doing things can be wanting.

To consider this another way, think of a sponge. Its capacity to soak up is proportional to how much it is empty. If the sponge is already saturated, then it won't be able to hold much more. If it's drier, it can absorb greater amounts.

Our faith, which is often a patchwork of past and present, Bible stories and familiar hymns, of things learned or only imagined, can overwhelm our souls to the point that there's hardly any room left. Faith left unexamined can become like a closet—so jumbled and full of the old, both keepsakes and expendables, that you can't put in anything new no matter how valuable it may be. Stagnant faith, like stagnant water, does us little good.

So today I suggest you find that old folder inside you marked "Palm Sunday" and air it out a bit. Let some sunlight in so that you can see with a new perspective. Listen again to the story today of Jesus' coming as if it were the very first time and discover anew how it intersects with your life. It does, you know!

Christ's entry on that Sunday of palms long ago was not simply the story of parading into a certain city on a particular day. At a deeper level it's really about his entering into the hearts of women and men of all times. The scriptures tell about his coming into Jerusalem to the praise of a noisy crowd, but then anyone can cheer for the moment. Hearing this story will have no more than fleeting significance for us unless we are ready to let Jesus enter into our space, unless we open ourselves to him right now.

Jesus comes again today. He rides into our lives as one who fully emptied himself so that God could occupy every fiber of him. When we in turn free up some spiritual space inside us, when we're able to rid ourselves of dormant thoughts that occupy much of our inner room, then we're open and ready for what Christ can bring today. When I can clear out the thought that Palm Sunday has nothing more it can teach me, I can experience it as if it is the first time I've heard this powerful story.

Lowly and humble, exalted and glorified, Jesus enters into Jerusalem and into our lives. He offers us acceptance. He presents us with meaning and purpose, companionship and direction. He brings us what we otherwise search for in vain. When we truly welcome him without reservation, his love will make us complete.

Today's story about God's Messiah is ancient to be sure, but it's neither dated nor time-limited. The parade into Jerusalem may be over, but his journey is never-ending. Within every human heart Christ's entry can still be experienced today because he was born and died for each one of us... and for the sake of the world.