

"The Victory Parade"

Zechariah 9:9-10; Matthew 21:1-9

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

March 25, 2018—Palm Sunday—Rev. Ronald Botts

There are two kinds of parades: those that are meticulously planned and those that are largely seat-of-the-pants. The *planned* ones are like the 4th of July and Memorial Day. Rather than commemorating something new, these spectacles remember something past. They keep memories alive. They don't allow us to forget. They put our history in perspective.

On the other hand, the *unscheduled* ones take place quickly and spontaneously, usually after some major event. Parades are a natural way to celebrate accomplishments, or conquests, or some triumph over odds. So while there may yet be more to do, the basic deed is done. It's time to party and enjoy the spoils.

Victors in most every war have had the chance to parade before their fellow citizens and to receive their cheers. The end of WWI and WWII saw hundreds of parades, maybe thousands when you count all the little hamlets across America that wanted to say "thanks" to their soldiers. Broadway in New York City wasn't the only place returning heroes could be honored in style; hometown Main Street could do quite as well on a smaller scale.

Athletic victories are also celebrated in a similar way. Thousands of cheering fans line the roadway when the World Series winners or the Superbowl champs come back home and emotions riding high. After the finals of the current NCAA basketball tournament you can be sure some title city will get their turn at it. [not, unfortunately, Columbus for the Buckeyes]

The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem before Passover is also a parade of sorts. Our prior experience with such pageantry in modern life, however, may color how we read the Scriptures. We may have some assumptions that we shouldn't.

The Hebrew people were also accustomed to witnessing public spectacles. So when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that day long ago perhaps they, too, ascribed certain things to what they saw because of their prior expectations.

In the tradition of the church Palm Sunday is pictured as a day of triumph. Jesus rides into Jerusalem amid shouts of victory. The crowd gathers for a glimpse of this man and to cheer him onward. Yet, this one particular day is a striking contrast to the time of ministry that precedes it and to the events which are soon to follow.

Liturgically, Palm Sunday is flanked on one side by Lent—a time of reflection, a time when Christians through prayer and fasting contemplate the life of Jesus and think about their lives as well. On the other side of this day stands the week in which Jesus was betrayed, tried, and publicly executed. Palm Sunday is a day of triumph followed by travail.

It's good to mark this occasion as we do today, but just what is it that we celebrate? Did Jesus have a typical parade in mind when he entered into Jerusalem that day or did others

take this and create a festive atmosphere? And why, of all things, did he choose to ride on a donkey? Why not on the back of a powerful white steed? Why not in a decorated chariot?

Riding on the back of a donkey is like putting the grand marshal of a contemporary parade in the back seat of an '85 Datsun. Hardly a fit image for someone so important. Perhaps the events of this day challenge us with a new definition of triumph and victory?

You'll remember that the lectionary reading for the first week of Lent tells of Jesus, at the outset of his ministry, being driven into the wilderness and tempted for forty days. At one point Evil Personified took Jesus to a high mountain and showed him the kingdoms of the world stretched out below. "It is yours," the Devil said, "if you are willing to pay the price."

Though we may not often think of it in this way, Palm Sunday presents another point of temptation in the life of Jesus. Whereas in the wilderness Evil confronted Jesus openly and boldly, on Palm Sunday, at the peak of his popularity, temptation now imbeds itself in the cheering crowd; but it is the same sinister power at work. It is yet another occasion of Christ's testing to be true to his calling.

In Jesus' day there were high hopes of overthrowing foreign domination. The Hebrews were tired of their Roman occupiers and all who had come before them. So it was that when he arrived in Jerusalem, the crowd saluted him with the words: "Blessed be the Kingdom of our father David that is coming!"

There were many predictions of a future Messiah in the writings of the prophets. One of the most vivid images was that of a Chosen One who would establish a temporal kingdom as well as a spiritual one. It pictured Israel being turned from a conquered land into the most powerful nation on earth. The Kingdom of God would then be a visible, tangible reality.

"Hosanna to the Son of David!" the crowd shouted. The Messianic figure that immediately came to their mind was one associated with King David, the conquering warrior and political hero. Perhaps this Jesus was the embodiment of that prophesy. You really can't fault the people in hoping for this kind of salvation. When you've been oppressed for so long, you're desperate to rise.

This Messiah-King was pictured as establishing his throne in Jerusalem. He would assemble the 12 scattered tribes and destroy the enemies of Israel. He would be the right hand of God and execute vengeance, showing that the Lord cannot forever be thwarted. So it's not hard to imagine that the people of Jerusalem were primed for revolution. They were awaiting the one who would lead them onto victory and release from subjugation.

There's no way of knowing how large the crowd was that gathered as Jesus made entry into Jerusalem. Evidently, though, it was large enough that local officials took more than passing notice. The people pressed around Jesus as word spread that this might be the one they had been waiting for. His appearance that day revived their hope in the restoration of Israel.

When rumor spread that Jesus might be coming to the city to confront its secular authorities, many came out to welcome him and to mobilize support for his movement. The atmosphere was ripe for overthrow on that day when Jesus rode into the city.

In the rock opera "Jesus Christ Superstar" these words are spoken by one of the characters and directed toward Jesus:

*There must be over fifty thousand screaming love and more
for you.
Everyone of fifty thousand would do whatever you ask him to.
Keep them yelling their devotion but add a touch of hate at
Rome.
You will rise to a greater power; we will win ourselves a home.
You'll get the power and the glory for ever and ever and ever.*

It would be unlikely that Jesus was oblivious to the crowd nor unaware of the expectations of many in his midst. He knew very well the aspirations of his people for independence. He knew why many of them were cheering. It was a great popular demonstration for him with all the exterior signs of a victory celebration, but inwardly for Jesus it may have been a day of tense struggle.

Contrary to these popular expectations, Jesus identified the Messiah in terms of Isaiah's portrait of the suffering servant. Here the awaited one comes not to conquer, but to redeem; not to destroy, but to bind up. He is the one whose strength lies not in the size of his legions, but in patient and forgiving love. Jesus understood the Kingdom of God not in terms of pomp and splendor, but in how it changes lives.

Ironically, few seemed to really understand Jesus' choice of such a humble entry into Jerusalem. Even those closest to him failed to grasp it fully. But no doubt Jesus recalled vividly the prophesy of Isaiah:

"The Lord says... My devoted servant, with whom I am pleased, will bear the punishment of many and for his sake I will forgive them. And so I will give him a place of honor, a place among great and powerful men. He willingly gave his life and shared the fate of evil men. He took the place of many sinners and prayed that they might be forgiven."

Again, as in the wilderness, Jesus faced the tempting lure of worldly dominion. He had to once more consider whether to respond to the people's popular desire for a temporal savior or to be for them a redeemer with far greater power. He had to decide whether to be swayed by the accolades of the crowd or to stay true to who he was.

The triumph of Palm Sunday is not really the size of the crowd. The shouts of "hallelujah" in the end are of little importance, nor are the branches and cloaks strewn along the way. The real victory of Palm Sunday is Christ's steadfastness in the face of temptation, his determination to fulfill his Messiahship, the choice of sacrifice over safety and accommodation.

Just as this day may have been a time of true soul searching for Jesus, Palm Sunday challenges us to examine our lives as well. We have to stop and look inward and consider whether our priorities are in order. For every day we must step up to the challenge before us and choose either to do God's will or not.

Palm Sunday is a continuing reminder of one willing to die that we might live in fullness of life. In humble entry Jesus came into Jerusalem, and what he came to do was to change the world. Today we must either fall in step with him or march away to the drum of temptation to seek our glory elsewhere.

Choose wisely as if your soul depends upon it... for truly it does.