



THE PARADE OF LIFE
Matthew 21:1-17

As we open our lesson today we see that the excitement and energy of the Passover celebration is in full swing. Festivity was in the air.

The normal population of the city swelled with countless pilgrims who made their way to the Holy City. Worshipers came from every land possible for this annual celebration. The noise of Passover lambs also filled the air as the Temple priests made sacrifices to Jehovah God for the atonement of sin.

Certain portions of the Psalms known as the “Songs of Ascent” were sung and chanted as they approached the Holy City – the city of David. **Psalm 122** was often upon their lips and hearts “I rejoiced with those who said to me

‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.

Our feet are standing - In your gates, O Jerusalem.

That is where the tribes go up - The tribes of the Lord.”

Much like our Holy Days – song – food – family – faith – celebration are all woven together. It is hard to separate one from the other. Deep memories – precious memories were renewed and rekindled in the hearts and minds of the pilgrims as they approached the city on the hill.

It was here that Father Abraham took his son Isaac to be sacrificed to the Lord. David – their greatest king – had climbed and conquered these hills. Solomon had built the great Temple here. Like links in a golden chain – generations of pilgrims were connected to each other. These powerful traditions had held them together during a difficult period in their life as a people and nation. Traditions can be useful. They are useful the way bark on a tree is useful – to protect the life within. They preserve truth – but they are not truth. All truth must be lived and experienced firsthand.

We can become so attached to tradition – that we miss the firsthand opportunity of what the living God is doing in our generation.¹ You can be so close to the kingdom – but still miss it.

Since the days of the great prophets – the people had waited for their Messiah – their new king. He would be a descendant of David. Like Solomon – he would enter Jerusalem in a triumphant entry – a great parade.

Like many of you gathered here today – I love a great parade. Ever since our daughter’s band at Easton High was selected for the Rose Bowl parade – we watch it every year. I can’t tell you how many parades my son-in-law dragged us to at Disney World last year. Parades. Parades say a great deal about us. They allow us to be spectators – to sit on the sidelines while the world passes us by. The Bible makes it very clear – heroes are here today and gone tomorrow.

It refuses to feed our lust for hero worship. It will not allow us to join fan clubs. Fan clubs encourage secondhand living. Jesus tells us to pick up the cross and follow.²

My colleague Bill Hybels shares, “Everyone who lined the streets that day had a different reason for being there and waving those palm branches. Some were political activists – they heard Jesus had supernatural powers and they wanted him to use it to free Israel from Roman rule. Others had loved ones who were sick or dying and they waved branches hoping and longing for physical healing. Some were onlookers merely looking for something to do that day. There were some who were genuine followers who desired Jesus to establish himself as an earthly king.” It was the parade of life.

“Jesus was the only one in the parade who knew why he was going to Jerusalem. He came to die. He had a mission to fulfill. Everyone else had an agenda.”

We love to sing songs like “A Closer Walk with Thee” – which the Brass group did marvelously. However, when that closer walk demands obedience under fire – we say ‘Let me sit this out for awhile. I just cannot make a full-time commitment to Jesus. I will serve when it is convenient – when it fits my schedule. I served every third Sunday of the fourth month – and every second Sunday in November.’

A dear mentor and friend of mine served God in the United Methodist church in the south in the 1950’s and 1960’s. His commitment to Christ and the church compelled him to stand up for justice and righteousness in a time when others lived by the status quo. He was on his way to become a great bishop of our church when racism – which permeated both the lay and clergy – turned against him.

When I met him in New York City on a few occasions at Christ Church - I thanked him for his courage to stand up for Christ and his cross. He said, “It is tough to go against the grain – but it is even tougher to go against God.”

Remarkably my friend holds no bitterness in his heart. Obedience and commitment to Christ was required and he followed the cross – not the crowd. My friend and others like him only rejoice that in their lifetime and generation they had seen their actions bear good fruit. They loved the traditions of the United Methodist church – but their love of God was greater. They were about God’s mission – and not their private agendas.

First century Jewish expectations fixed their focus on the Mount of Olives as the place for the appearance of the Messiah.

Yes, when the Messiah 'Elijah' would come – all suffering would disappear.

Yes, when the Messiah came all injustice and oppression would disappear.

Yes, when the Messiah came all would be fine: when the Messiah comes.

However – in this book – wherever there is suffering – there you find the Messiah. He enters into it. He was wounded for our transgressions. The kingdom of God will be shaped by the cross – and not the war horse and sword.

As Jesus made his way down the Mount of Olives – the crowds exploded in sheer excitement. In the Temple and every local synagogue the words of Zechariah had been memorized:

“Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!
See, your King comes to you
Righteous and having salvation,
Gentle and riding on a donkey
On a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

The excitement of the crowd is contagious. They think they are participating in the coronation of their king. However, by Good Friday – they make it very clear to Pilate and others, “We don’t want this man to rule us.” They really didn’t want a ‘closer walk with Thee.’

The excitement of the parade is contagious – but their applause and approval does not last much past sundown. The shouting dies out – the crowd thins – the streets grow empty. The palm branches – once a red carpet welcome – have had the life trampled out of them.

I find it interesting that in **John 6** after our Lord feeds the great crowd – they wanted to crown him king right on the spot. Jesus refused. However, when Jesus came to Jerusalem to declare his kingship – they refused and sought another.

Yes, Jesus is our King – and theirs as well. However, his kingship and power will be lived out in sacrificial love – rather than violence and vengeance. Their eyes are focused on their nation’s salvation and restoration. Jesus’ kingdom is for the salvation of the world. He will enter into suffering in order to redeem it – and transform it.

We all know that expectations deeply affect our relationships – especially our expectations of God and his rule. It was true that first Palm Sunday – it is true today.

Jesus knows who he is. His identity will not be stolen from him. Jesus will not be king for a day – but for all of eternity.

Yes, Christ Jesus, the Lord of the church, has been hampered by the ways we unfortunately represent him. In my lifetime I have seen bishops and theologians seek to

reduce the mystery of his creation – the virgin birth – and the power of the resurrection to the limits of their finite minds. Their souls and spirits have capitulated to culture. Political groups and caucuses have tried to hijack his truth and way for their small purposes. All of them love Jesus up to a point. The point is the cross.

Jesus saw through them all and followed the greater and more excellent way. He still does. However, he has left us this book (the Bible) and the counsel of the Holy Spirit to grant us wisdom and discernment to fulfill his mission and not somebody else's agenda.

My mentor Eugene Peterson writes, "Hypocrisy is like high blood pressure. It is a silent killer."³ Don't let anything crowd out your commitment to Christ and his kingdom and silently kill your faith and life.

So, we gather here today as people of faith who have committed themselves to the kingdom of God. We are called to be disciples and people of the Way – not admirers of Jesus from a safe distance. Encouraged by our Lord's courage and mission and those in the greater parade of the past 2000 years who have picked up the cross – we follow in the same way. We continue to commit ourselves to a kingdom that has come – but will come in all of its fullness and glory in the days ahead.

The real Palm Sunday parade is yet to come. You and I and others gathered here have the privilege to know Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. At some appointed time in history he will come again as Judge and King of Kings and Lord of Lords. For some it will be a day of rejoicing. For many others it will be a day of great sorrow.

Yes, Jesus, who entered Jerusalem once on a gentle donkey with the children shouting "Hosanna" and waving palm branches, will enter in a much more definitive way. Beginning in **Revelation 19:11** we read,

I saw Heaven standing open
And there before me – was a white horse
Whose rider is Faithful and True.

With Justice he Judges and makes war.
His eyes are like blazing fire
And on His head are many Crowns.

He has a name written on him
That no one knows except himself

He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood
And his name is the Word of God.
The armies of heaven were following him
Riding on white horses – and dressed

In fine linen, white and clean.

Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword
With which to strike down the nations
He will rule them with an iron scepter.

On his Robe and on his thigh
He has this name written
“King of Kings and Lord of Lords.”

And then in **Revelation 22:12-14** we read:

Behold I am coming soon.
My reward is with Me –
I will give to Everyone –
According to what He has done.
I am the Alpha and the Omega
The First and the Last –
The Beginning and the End.

This blessing is granted to those who hold to the testimony of Jesus.

To be sure you are a part of this great kingdom and blessed hope the line starts here: right behind the cross. This is the dividing line between your agenda – and God’s mission. Pick up the cross. This promotes firsthand faith and not a fan club mentality.

May God give you courage so to choose and so to follow.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
April 5, 2009 Palm Sunday
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ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **PRAYING WITH JESUS**, Harper: San Francisco, 1993, May 17th and July 1st devotionals.

² Eugene H. Peterson, **RUN WITH THE HORSES**, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, ILL, 1983, page 12.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, **TELL IT SLANT**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 2008, page 139.