



“PALM BOULEVARD”
SERMON FOR PALM SUNDAY
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ST. ANDREW’S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
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MATTHEW 21:1-11

A little boy was sick on Palm Sunday and stayed home from church with his mother. His father returned from church holding a palm branch. The little boy was curious and asked, “Why do you have that palm branch, dad?” “You see, when Jesus came into town, everyone waved Palm Branches to honor him, so we got Palm Branches today.” The little boy replied, “Aw Shucks! The one Sunday I miss is the Sunday that Jesus shows up!”

Today is Palm Sunday. It is traditionally called the “Liturgy of Palms” Sunday, which marks the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. It would be his last journey to that great city. In seven short days, Jesus would go from hometown hero to a totally rejected and humiliated criminal. And Jesus knew this. So, Jesus came into town with a specific agenda. This time, Jesus wanted to make an impression. Now, it wasn’t for self-serving reasons. You know, like a military war hero riding through on a glorious white stallion, celebrating in a tickertape parade. No, Jesus wanted to make another impression. He wanted people to know that what they were asking for was indeed what they were going to get, which only goes to prove, you’d better be sure of what you ask for as you just might get it.

Whenever I read the account of Palm Sunday, I remember how the event is depicted in one of my favorite movies, “Jesus Christ, Superstar.” Have you seen it? In the movie, the Palm Sunday crowd sings, “Christ, you know I love you. Did you see, I waved?”

But, you see, as your pastor, I take my responsibility to nurture your spiritual growth seriously. And you cannot grow being fed a steady diet of baby food. So I cannot and will not skip from Palm Sunday to Easter morning and avoid talking about what happened in between. You cannot get from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday without going through Good Friday. Before Jesus could be resurrected, he had to die. So I have to talk about the pain this morning, because the same crowd that shouted “hosannah” to Jesus on Palm Sunday, the same crowd that sang, “Christ, you know I love you. Did you see, I waved?” are the same people who, before one week will have passed, will realize that Jesus is not exactly the kind of Messiah they had wanted. And before the week is out, they will turn against Jesus and demand his death.¹

It’s not Easter yet, but it won’t be long now, just seven short days. And what joy we will feel when we get there! But we have a big problem. To get from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday we have to walk through a graveyard in the dark. The only road from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday runs right through the middle of Good Friday. That road is not an easy road to walk. Those who don’t have the stomach for the journey, those who seek that ouch-less faith we talked about, will stay home from today until next Sunday, showing up just in time for the trumpets and the lilies and the hallelujah chorus.

The rest of us better hang onto one another as tightly as we can as we tiptoe past the tombstones and stand together at the foot of the cross. And we must not look the other way as we stand there. It’s going to hurt to see him hanging there, knowing the agony he’s going through and knowing further that the only reason he’s putting himself through all that is his love for you and me. Another shout will ring out on Good Friday, but it won’t be “Hosannah!” It won’t be, “Christ, you

know I love you. Did you see, I waved?” It will be “Tetelestai!” – it is finished. And the Son of God will die.²

But this issue is one that plagues Christianity in the 21st Century. We have become a society obsessed with keeping a lid on things that pertain to our faith. Anything that makes us vulnerable, especially when it comes to our faith in God, well, that’s just off-limits. So, when Matthew shares with his readers this hubbub about Jesus and has everyone asking, “Who is this man?”, immediately we are left with a decision to make. How will we regard Jesus? Will we see him as just another prophet from Nazareth, or not?

But there is something in human nature that hates to decide “Yes” or “No.” Recently there was a radio announcement that next week was National Procrastinators’ Week. “Actually,” said the announcer, “they were going to hold the celebration this week, but the organizers decided to put it off until next week!” Our modern society has made such a virtue of openness and neutrality that we forget it is the fundamental choices we make that shape all of life, and for that matter, the life to come. I heard about a woman who said she would not become a Christian because there were too many obstacles in the path of belief. “I’m not an atheist, but I’m just not convinced that God exists, or that Christianity is the right religion. I’m going to withhold judgment, and consider the matter impartially.” That’s fine, except that I hope this woman decides pretty soon. She is 87 years old, and her so-called “neutrality” is fast becoming academic! The simple fact is no one can remain neutral on the issue of Jesus Christ.³

But what can we say about this question? Who is this Jesus? What would people say about him if he were to come today? I mean, can you imagine if Jesus had been treated like a 21st-century celebrity as he rode into Jerusalem?

- Wolf Blitzer might have reported on rumors that Jesus planned to disrupt Temple business.
- Pundits would have argued about who he “really” was.
- Gail Sheehy would undoubtedly have written a psychological profile for Vanity Fair.
- Some tabloid would investigate Jesus’ relationship with “the woman at the well.”
- There would be in-depth analysis by cult specialists and modern-day Pharisees on MSNBC.
- A council of church officials would be in place to study the authenticity of Jesus’ feeding the multitudes and walking on water.
- As he entered the dusty city, hundreds if not thousands would have snapped their throwaway Kodaks, and pointed their videocams while Katie Couric, along with Willard Scott, making a special appearance, would stand by to offer color commentary.⁴

Ironically, it has everything to do with how we receive this man Jesus as he rides in to town on that borrowed donkey. It affects our very lives. It affects every decision we make. How easy it would be for us to just chuck it all, stay home in bed, or go out to the lake on our Sundays. How easy it would be for us to relieve our hectic schedules of all the commitments it takes for us to be faithful – bible study, prayer time, worship, fellowship, Sunday School, and all the rest. How easy! But it is our faith that keeps us fixated on a sacrificing God who dares to ride humbly, yet triumphantly, into town, only to die one week later. It is precisely this commitment that Christ had for us that enabled him to go to the cross for us.

In a large city a minister served in a ghetto community. Once while talking with a friend he told him about his work, all the human suffering he saw, and how hard it was for him to face it every day. His friend said to him, “Why don’t you just run away from it all?” He replied, “I would do just that, but a strange man on a cross won’t let me.”

Maybe there are times when some of us are tempted to take the easy way and live only for ourselves, with no concern about the hurts of the world, the challenge of Christ, the call of the church, the demands of the kingdom. But that strange man on a cross who went to face Jerusalem will not let us get away, or get off so easily, or disappear into some safe harbor of escapism. Always He calls us to meet Him in the road and go with Him.⁵

Perhaps that is the problem today. We've taken the low road so long that it is a comfortable, familiar path. We've forgotten the price that was about to be paid. We've forgotten what it felt like for Jesus to have heard those words "Hosanna!", and then a few short days later to hear those painful words of his own people, the people he came to save, shouting, "Crucify him!" Nevertheless, Jesus went to Jerusalem, and went to the cross. Why? Because there is a word there – must.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer would write in his book "The Cost Of Discipleship", these words: "Jesus Christ must suffer and be rejected. This "must" is inherent in the promise of God - the Scriptures must be fulfilled. There is a distinction here between suffering and rejection. Had he only suffered, Jesus might still have been applauded as the Messiah. All the sympathy and admiration of the world might have been focused on his passion. It could have been viewed as a tragedy with its own intrinsic value, dignity and honor. But in the passion, Jesus is a rejected Messiah. His rejection robs the passion of its halo of glory. It must be a passion without honor."⁶

So, who is this Jesus? And why should we care? After all, how many parades have we seen? How many times have we built our hopes up in the next great savior who was to ride into town? How many times have we been disappointed? What makes this man so different?

In his classic novel, "The Robe," Lloyd C. Douglas has a character called Marcellus, who had become enamored of Jesus. He wrote letters to his fiancé Diana in Rome. He told her about Jesus' teachings, about his miracles, then about his crucifixion, and then about his resurrection. Finally he informed her that he had decided to become a disciple of Jesus. In her letter of response, Diana said, "What I feared was that it might affect you. It is a beautiful story. Let it remain so. We don't have to do anything about it, do we?"⁷

All too often, we find ourselves torn between the passion of God in Christ for us, and the temptation to keep the story at arm's length. We know what sacrifice was made, but we would rather not invest ourselves of the call and cost of discipleship. We'd rather not take it seriously.

The story is told of the pee-wee baseball game. When the young boy got up to the plate he looked over to the coach, and he saw him give the signal to sacrifice bunt. He then promptly proceeded to take three big swings and strike out. The coach ran up to him and said: Didn't you see me give you the signal to sacrifice. Yes, the boy replied. But I didn't really think that you meant it.

Isn't that what we so often say to God? "Yes, lord, I heard that talk about sacrifice but I didn't really think that you meant it." The cross says emphatically that he did mean it.

It is a short walk from the actual gate where Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem on that Sunday of Palms to the place outside the city gates called Golgotha. But that journey would take a week. And during that journey, Jesus would see his people, the people he had fed with miracles of loaves and fishes, healed with miracles of healing, raised with the power of the Holy Spirit in him, and on and on and on. And these very same people, who would shout "Hosanna!" – literally, "Come Save Us!", would turn and shout out, "Crucify Him! We have no King but Caesar! Crucify Him!"

I wonder. I wonder what our response might be, if we had been there that week, lining the streets.. What would our shouts have been? It didn't stop him from going through with it. Because it was for our sakes that he made that journey down Palm Boulevard. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(Endnotes)

¹ Johnny Dean, 1999.

² Johnny Dean, 1999.

³ Robert A. Beringer, *Turning Points*, CSS Publishing Company, 1995, 0-7880-0284-8. Adapted.

⁴ "The Celebrity Christ," by John Maroni.

⁵ Thomas A. Pilgrim, *The Man From Galilee*, CSS Publishing Company, Inc, 1997, 0-7880-1131-6.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller (Great Britain: SCM Press, Ltd., 1959), 76.

⁷ *Collected Sermons*, Dr. Bill Bouknight, ChristianGlobe Network, 2002.