

Crown Him with Many Crowns

Luke 19:28-40

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Palm Sunday, March 20, 2016

Each of the four gospels includes the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem, and the church celebrates what is labeled as the Triumphal Entry on this Sunday before Easter. In one form or another each of the gospels uses Psalm 118 where we find the joyful words, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” Matthew and Mark both use the word Hosanna, which comes from Psalm 118 and means Save, or God save us. They also tell us the crowds cut branches and spread them on the road. John tells us the people cut palm branches and went to meet Jesus with the branches, shouting Hosanna. It is from John’s gospel that we come to call today Palm Sunday, and the image of the people holding palm branches and shouting Hosanna might well have looked a lot like what happened in our sanctuary this morning as our children and youth came in singing Hosanna and waving the palm branches. We don’t know exactly the size of the crowd, for Mark it was many people, for Matthew a very large crowd, John tells us it was a great crowd, and Luke that it was the whole crowd of disciples. You can almost imagine such a festive day with branches waving and crowds shouting praise that the emphasis wasn’t on the details as much as joyful celebration that accompanied Jesus as he finally arrived in Jerusalem.

The size of the crowd doesn’t particularly concern me. Whether it was a crowd of his disciples or a great and very large crowd, what took place was a mighty fine procession. I grew up in a town that at the time was smaller than Westerly and I spent twenty years in a town with a population six times the size of Rhode Island and a city limit that might actually be larger than this whole state. I have been to parades in small towns and I have been to parades in big cities, and whether the crowd is hundreds or hundreds of thousands doesn’t matter to me. I love parades of every size and I love parades for every celebration.

Our little town had a Christmas parade on the Friday right after Thanksgiving. The whole town would come out and every club and organization would march and carry banners or even make floats. The high school marching band would appear, and for a small town it was a large band, drums firing through the air and horns blazing. One year my brother Barry was the drum major, and he was born to be a drum major. He carried himself with an air that said "I'm in charge." He was almost regal. But his biggest fear was that he would be distracted by someone in the crowd and break out laughing. So he said, "Wayne, don't you dare try to make me laugh during the parade." Well, for the whole two mile route that the band walked, you know exactly what me and a bunch of other junior high yahoos spent our time doing. We hollered and yelled and made faces and funny noises and hung from tree branches. But Barry was a rock. Not one smile. I have to admit I was proud of him for the regal way he led the marching band. We loved our small town parade, and what we loved best was the way it ended. The finish line for the parade happened to be right in front of the dairy that our town is famous for. So after all the excitement of the parade my dad would buy us the world's largest ice cream cone and we would lick to our heart's delight. It doesn't have to be a big parade to be a good parade.

But I will say a parade in a big city does have its own style and flair. In Houston it is a Thanksgiving Parade and it takes place on Thanksgiving Day. Hundreds of thousands of people line the streets and it is quite a glorious day. Texas Southern has a marching band that not only brings some soul music and jazz, they also break out in a series of awesome dance steps that bring the crowd to their feet. It wouldn't be a real parade in a town like Houston if you didn't have cowboys and their horses and they never disappointed. It was in Houston that we were introduced to Pancho Claus. Pancho Claus a Hispanic Santa Claus and instead of sleigh and reindeer he came in a tricked out cruiser complete with those shock absorbers that make the car bounce up and down and dance all around. There was no hometown ice cream parlor at the end of the parade route in Houston, but the parade was Thanksgiving Day, so that might have even been better as we all rushed home to a feast of turkey and mashed potatoes and pumpkin pie.

Some parades honor soldiers who have returned victorious from battle. Some parades honor athletes who win state titles, regional titles, national titles, Olympic champions, and even Super Bowl and World Series champions.

Why shouldn't there be a parade for Jesus? Why shouldn't the crowd of disciples, or many people, or a very large crowd, even a great crowd line the streets with their cloaks and branches and even raise high in the sky some palm branches and shout out, "Hosanna! Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" If there was a parade, what would the parade consist of? Just Jesus on a donkey? That would be enough. That would be more than enough. But maybe there was more. One thing Luke does tell us about Palm Sunday is that the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen. Wouldn't that be a parade? If we could bring together all the miracles the people had seen and line them up in a parade, and then let the crowd joyfully praise God for all the miracles.

There would be some floats. The first float might be a boat, with Peter and James and John on that boat. They had argued with Jesus about putting that boat out in deep waters because they had fished all night and had not caught one single thing. And then they obeyed Jesus. They trusted Jesus. Let that boat float by with nets so full they are about to break. Everyone knew Peter and James and John were no longer fishing...for fish. They had left those nets and followed Jesus, who said, "From now on you will fish for men."

Following the boat would come a house that for all the world looks like a Frat House. It is filled with people the world thinks very little of, people with bad reputations, tax collectors and sinners. It is the house of Levi. Jesus called Levi to leave his tax booth and Levi was so taken by Jesus he invited him to a party at his house, where Levi invited all of his friends. This raucous scene is actually a joyful celebration, as it was the occasion for Jesus to tell us all the good news, "It is not the healthy that need a doctor. I came to call sinners to repentance." The house of Levi was rockin' because there was a revival.

Here comes another house, and a memorable scene is being portrayed. The house is packed with people, so full no one else can get in. Outside the house is a man on a stretcher, a mat. Even though he cannot walk, he is not alone. He has friends, and his friends have lifted up his mat and brought him to the house to see Jesus. Undaunted by the front door that will not open they climb up on the roof and begin to tear a hole in the roof and before you know it they have dropped their friend right into the lap of Jesus. When that same front door bursts open the man no longer is confined to his mat. He has been healed and he is walking on his own power. And something else happened in that house. The man found forgiveness.

So many more floats might have been there, another boat showing fearful disciples trapped on a stormy sea that cry out in fear only to find they never needed to fear...they just needed faith, for Jesus wakes up and calms the storm. There might have been a float of a big tree, maybe a sycamore tree, where this short little tax collector named Zacchaeus is climbing the tree so he can get a look at Jesus, and then climbing right back down that tree when Jesus says I'm coming to your house.

Maybe there were some big balloons, not depicting Snoopy or The Lion King, Frozen or Homer Simpson, but depicting lives that had been changed by the miracles Jesus brought. Each and every miracle touched a particular person or a particular group, and yet each miracle was a sign for the whole crowd, indeed for the whole world, that in Jesus there was healing and hope for all. Even as the crowd joyfully praised God for the miracles, there was more reverence than reverie. Parents explained to their children this one was a leper who was made clean...a blind man who now sees...a deaf person who hears...one who was lame and now walks...look, here is a woman who was judged and rejected because of her past, but the tears she shed as she washed the feet of Jesus were a sign that she knew that his love for her was deep and unbounded and eternal, just like his love is for you, and for me...can you imagine a parent telling these wonderful stories of healing and restoration to a child and saying to that child Jesus wants those very things for you and for me and for this whole world. As we are thinking about the love Jesus has for the whole world one more balloon comes by, a bouquet of

balloons comes, more than you can count, although if you could count you would find there are exactly 5,000 balloons in this bountiful bouquet. Jesus loves each one, and yet he loves every one, and when he fed a crowd that day with just a few loaves and fishes, it was if he was promising that there would come a day when not one of his precious children would go hungry. Not one of his precious children on this whole earth. When you see the scope of his ministry and the depth of his love you realize why a parade like this would be more about reverence and less about reverie.

Maybe some still scenes come by showing a Samaritan stopping to help a wounded traveler, a man once tormented by demons now sitting in his right mind, and everyone's favorite, a lost child returning home to the arms of the loving father.

That last scene, the prodigal returning home to the loving father, that signals the musical part of the parade, for when the son was welcomed home there was music and dancing. Apparently the word used in the New Testament can actually mean the music was a bagpipe. A few weeks ago we had a bagpipe in our church playing Amazing Grace. Wouldn't it be a nice touch to have a bagpiper following the Prodigal Son and playing, "I once was lost but now am found." But it also might have been a full on band, the kind you hear about in Psalm 150 where there are trumpets and horns, harps and lyres, tambourines, strings, flutes, and percussion and cymbals, loud clashing cymbals. That band could have been playing a medley of the Hallelujah Chorus and Lift up your heads ye mighty gates and All Glory, Laud, and Honor and Hosanna! Loud Hosanna! And out come the palm branches and the shouts of joy.

I am all for shouting Hosanna and waving branches and singing praise to God, especially because of the miracles Jesus did. In the midst of all the joyful shouting I wonder if there might have been a moment when things took a more serious turn, a more thoughtful turn, a more reflective turn. If we listen to the words the crowds of disciples were saying about Jesus we move from the joyful praise for the miracles and the Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord to a phrase

that is filled with meaning. They say, “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest.” The angels who appeared to the shepherds had promised in Jesus that there would be peace on earth. Now the crowd of disciples sings that there would be peace in heaven. Could it be the people actually believed Jesus would bring peace in heaven and on earth?

We are reminded by commentators that the longing for peace was for the peace expressed in the biblical word Shalom. Shalom is a peace that touches every aspect of life and means more than an absence of war. It means the presence of God’s kingdom, God’s peaceable kingdom, God’s kingdom of justice and mercy and love. So here at the tail end of the parade what comes last would not be the least, although what comes last would be especially meaningful for the least. For the powerless, the vulnerable, the poor, the oppressed, and the lost. These last floats in the parade wouldn’t need to be big and flashy to catch your attention. They might simply have a wolf and lamb together, a leopard lying down near a goat, a calf and a lion and yearling all together. And there in their midst would be a little child who leads them. Above these various animals that have come together in peace and harmony would be a banner that says, “They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain.” Perhaps the next display would have swords, representing instruments of war and violence. Those swords have been turned into plowshares, with the longing hope written in bold, “They will not study or train for war anymore.” Peace. The people believe Jesus will bring peace. The people believe Jesus is the Prince of Peace. They believe he brings good news to the poor. They believe he brings Jubilee, that great time of restoration for all God’s children, that time when those who have been lost or displaced or pushed to the margins are brought home, and those who have abundance, who have blessing, throw wide their arms and their resources to welcome home all people, for they understand all people deserve a home, deserve a place where they belong.

Yeah, I think Jesus is worthy of a parade. And what if there were no floats and bands and balloons and bagpipes. What if it was just Jesus, riding on a donkey, the foal of a colt? I think we would sing just as loud and we would wave the palms with every bit as much energy and enthusiasm. This is our king and he comes to us. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.

I just wish I could tell you this parade had a happy ending. There is no hometown ice cream shop that Jesus ends up at. They don't fold up all the floats and make their way home for a Thanksgiving feast of turkey and stuffing. There will be another meal, a Passover meal. But that meal is foreboding for as Jesus breaks the bread and passes the cup he says this is my body and my blood which will be broken and poured out. As much as that meal has blessed our lives it always begins with the words, "On the night Jesus was betrayed." Betrayed. Arrested. Beaten. Mocked. Scorned. Accused. Convicted. Nailed to the cross. Crucified. Dead. Buried.

This parade ends in a tomb and the final sound is a huge stone crashing into place, sealing him in a chamber of death. We know Jesus died alone. We know he was buried all by himself. But all our hopes and all our dreams were buried with him. The hopes of the fishermen and tax collectors and sinners, the lepers and the lame, the prodigals and the outcasts, the poor and oppressed, the ones crushed under the weight of the world, the ones yearning for healing, crying out for peace, it is as if every single person in that joyful parade marched into the tomb with him and every single hope was put to death. There was darkness over the whole face of the land. It was a darkness unto death.

As a church we have been reading chapter by chapter and verse by verse through the Gospel of Luke. Whether you have been reading with us or not I encourage you to read slowly the story of what happens after this parade we find in Luke 19. Read it slowly and let it sink in. See what happens to the king who comes in the name of the Lord. See what happens to Jesus, the Beloved Son of God. See what happens to Jesus, our Lord and Savior. See how he gets to that tomb. I hope you can join us this week for our special services of worship on Maundy Thursday as we remember the Last Supper and Good Friday as we read verse by verse how he suffered and died.

And then let's come back together next Sunday. Let's gather at the tomb. It really isn't a happy ending to this story. Next Sunday there will be some women at the tomb with heavy hearts, weeping and carrying spices to anoint the dead body of the one they loved so dearly. It is not a happy ending when Jesus dies. But come next Sunday. It might not be a happy ending, but let me tell you, it is an incredible beginning.