

“Celebration and Anguish”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
Palm Sunday, April 1, 2007  
Scripture: Luke 19:28-40 and 22:39-46

I remember one day I experienced as a young kid. Someone who lived nearby spread word, and kids and some parents gathered down the street. Bikes and tricycles and those little red wagons were quickly decorated, and noisemakers were distributed. There was an excitement in the air. A parade, right here in our neighborhood. Years later, I cannot remember the occasion or even if there was an occasion. And I am sure there were some in the neighborhood who wondered what on earth was going on. I do know that it was a good day to be a kid.

Palm Sunday is also a good day to be a kid. Waving palm branches. Getting to shout hosanna. The easily remembered refrain of “All Glory, Laud and Honor.” Palm Sunday is a good day to be a kid, or, for that matter, a parent, grandparent, or anyone who likes kids. If worship is to engage our hearts and minds and senses, we need parades and hosannas in worship.

For today we remember a triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the hub of the political, economic, and temple life and bustling with religious pilgrims there to celebrate Passover.<sup>1</sup> There must have been some in Jerusalem who wondered what on earth was going on that day, but for the disciples and other followers of Jesus, it was a good day. They cried out, waved palm branches, threw down cloaks onto the dusty road – all in all, celebrating with all their hearts this young man who rode in on a donkey.

The celebration was a mixture of two parts deliberation, one part heavy symbolism, and lots of informality. All the gospels tell this as a story of great deliberation on Jesus’ part. He knew what he was doing. He sent two of the disciples ahead to procure the colt, and told them their lines to say to the colt’s owners. And the symbolism could not be missed, either by the disciples or the powerful watching from Jerusalem’s walls. He entered the capitol city, the occupied capitol city, the occupied capitol city on high alert due to the craziness of the Passover festival, with his followers shouting “blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” The deliberate preparations and the symbolism made it clear that a new king was in town.

But there is an apparent informality to the parade as well. He was, after all, on a colt picked up along the way. No chariot, no crown, no royal robes. The people gathered what they could, palm branches plucked off nearby trees, their cloaks and tunics. The parade gathered steam and energy and noise. The Pharisees, trying to keep things from becoming explosive with all the Roman soldiers around, said to Jesus, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop” (Luke 19:39). And Jesus knew that nothing could stop the heavenly joy that was breaking out. “I tell you, if these were silent [even] the stones would shout out” (Luke 19:40).

It was quite a celebration! Ride on, Jesus, ride on! Hosanna! “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Fifty years ago, Palm Sunday worship services ended there. Ended with a celebration. They could do that, of course, since later in the week schools would close and businesses would take off early, so that Christians could be at church again on Good Friday at noon. Long time members here at Central can recall those days of three hour worship services on Good Friday, when the sanctuary was packed with members and nearby workers. Different preachers would take turns in the pulpit, trying to do justice to the “seven last words” of Christ, as the hour of his death approached.

Times have changed since the 1950s of course. Good Friday is a day much like any other in the eyes of school calendars and CEOs. Parking downtown at noon on Good Friday is just about as difficult as any other business day. And fewer and fewer people attended the Holy Week services of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. I say this not to fix blame, but to acknowledge a major change. It is bad theology to go from the Palm Sunday celebration straight to an Easter celebration. It is bad theology for three reasons. First, it lends itself to a Christian triumphalism that ignores the meaning of the cross. Second, it doesn't ring true with our human experience, of lives filled with great joy and great pain. And third, it forgets the anguish and suffering Jesus faced. So today we have two pieces of art, Jesus entering Jerusalem with people smiling and waving palm branches, and Jesus, alone in prayer and agony in the garden of Gethsemane.

All parades come to an end, of course. I came down to the church a few Saturdays ago just as the St. Patrick's Day Parade was ending. As I drove in, people were milling through the streets, wearing green, with their cheeks painted with shamrocks. Not more than an hour later, the streets were eerily quiet, and the roads were covered with confetti and debris. One of the few signs of life was a street cleaner getting down to business. Sweeping away, along with the trash, all signs of the festivity that had just taken place. All parades come to an end.

And the celebration of Jesus entering Jerusalem would quiet down. We could see it coming. A few weeks ago, we heard the story of the Pharisees warning Jesus that Herod wanted to kill him. And Jesus at that time said “it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.” He continued, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Luke 13:31-35). Now he is in Jerusalem.

We can see it coming. The cheers of good people will not be enough. Celebration will turn into quiet anguish. And Jesus will go from the head of the parade to a lonely garden. The disciples went with him, but Jesus withdrew, Luke tells us, about “a stone's throw away.” And the darkness grew around him. Jesus knew what was coming, apparently. He too could tell that the glory and joy of Palm Sunday would feed into the suspicion and paranoia of political and religious leaders more intent on keeping an uneasy peace than doing justice.

I love He Qi's painting, "Praying in Gethsemane."<sup>2</sup> The shades of blue. The triangular connection between Jesus and the heavens bending low. The disciples, asleep, their heads at right angles to Jesus's alert posture.

"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). And right there we sense the utter humanity and goodness of Jesus. Who among us has not had to face unpleasant events, if not dangerous or perilous ones, that could not be put off no matter how much praying we did. As recent news was dominated by very public acknowledgments of cancer recurrences for Elizabeth Edwards and Tony Snow, we think of the too many people we know who receive similar diagnoses. And with Jesus, we might pray, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup." Remove this cup. "Yet not my will but yours be done," Jesus concluded.

Likely not in the original version of Luke's gospel, later tradition tells of how in his anguish sweat became great drops of blood falling onto the ground. Drop, drop, slow tears. The sense of being utterly alone in his time of trial. And then an angel appeared to Jesus to give him strength. Even at this moment, God was still in charge, sending angels and compassion to the One who would soon be mocked and tortured and executed.

He would need all the strength he could muster, for those final days in Jerusalem. The donkey had already been returned to its owner. The crowds had disappeared. The disciples had fallen asleep. And then it was time. Ride on, Jesus. Ride on, in majesty. And he rides on to die.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful on a regular basis to the thoughts and writings of John Buchanan in his editorials in The Christian Century. For his thoughts on today's mixture of the Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday themes, I am indebted to his editorial "Passion Narrative," in 20 March, 2007, 3.

<sup>2</sup> This painting is part of our "Bridging Two Worlds: The Art of He Qi" exhibit, and was on the bulletin cover. <http://www.heqigallery.com/GALLERY%20NT%20A/index.html>.