

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“From a Distance”

March 28, 2010 – Palm Sunday

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Luke 19: 28-40

28 After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

29 When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰saying, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹If anyone asks you, “Why are you untying it?” just say this: “The Lord needs it.”’

³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, ‘Why are you untying the colt?’ ³⁴They said, ‘The Lord needs it.’ ³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸saying,

*‘Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!’*

³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop.’ ⁴⁰He answered, ‘I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.’

Luke 22: 39-46, 54-62

39 He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. ⁴⁰When he reached the place, he said to them, ‘Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.’ ⁴¹Then he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed, ⁴²‘Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.’ ⁴³Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. ⁴⁴In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.]] ⁴⁵When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, ⁴⁶and he said to them, ‘Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.’

54 Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest’s house. But Peter was following at a distance. ⁵⁵When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. ⁵⁶Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, ‘This man also was with him.’ ⁵⁷But he

denied it, saying, 'Woman, I do not know him.'⁵⁸ A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, 'You also are one of them.' But Peter said, 'Man, I am not!'⁵⁹ Then about an hour later yet another kept insisting, 'Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean.'⁶⁰ But Peter said, 'Man, I do not know what you are talking about!' At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed.⁶¹ The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.'⁶² And he went out and wept bitterly.

A few years ago I got a call from a reporter for *The Deseret News*, one of Salt Lake City's two major daily newspapers. He was doing research on one of the most pressing religious issues of the day. "Why do so many people sit in the back of the church?" I thought for a moment and then told the reporter that I really didn't have a scientific answer. The best explanation I had was the obvious answer: people generally sat wherever they felt most comfortable. I told him I never worried too much about it. When the reporter's story finally ran a few weeks later, I was not quoted in the story. Evidently I had nothing to offer as authority. However other clergy were. One explanation for the overpopulation of the back row was that some people like to arrive at church late and want to get out early and sitting in the back facilitates both. Another was that people who sit to the back are those who don't want to stand out but just want to blend in. Think about a college class in which you don't want to be called upon by the professor. It is the same thing at worship. You don't want to draw attention to yourself. Finally the article quoted a 2001 study by Catholic University which said that those who sit in the back row may prefer spiritual distance from the pulpit. They don't want to be drawn into the drama of the pulpit or choir or lectern. The study found that those who sit closer to the back tend to view worship more as a social obligation rather than a spiritual one. Personally, I am a little concerned that there would be a study about such a topic. I'm sticking with my own theory: people sit wherever they feel most comfortable and it really doesn't matter as long as they are in the room.

I have a confession to make this morning. Every once in a while, Laura and I will purchase something that just doesn't fit, doesn't work, or isn't quite what we thought it would be. Now that the girls are older and buy their own clothes, it doesn't happen quite as often, but every once in a while we will have to return an item to the store and try to remedy the situation. This is the Ritter plan of action: Laura stands in line and does all of the negotiations with the return clerk. Art stands back at a distance and pretends he doesn't know Laura.

I recall one example from a few years ago. We had purchased an Easter outfit for Amelia. Two days after we bought it, the item went on sale. Laura wanted to get a refund from the sale price. She calmly approached the clerk with receipt in hand. Politely she explained the situation and asked if she might be refunded the difference between the sales price and the price she paid. Thoughtfully she mentioned that if she did not get a refund then she would simply return the unused dress and re-purchase it at the sale price. I, on the other hand, stood behind a rather large rack of sale clothing, pretending to look for bargains, just in case things got a little heated or embarrassing. I try to find something safe to hide behind, some a display of socks or belts or ties. You have to be careful around women's underwear and lingerie. I figure that if I stand close

enough but yet far enough away, Laura will know that I am there but no one else in the store with know that I am part of the transaction.

Timid? No! A coward? Never! I just imagine that any store clerk would be rather intimidated with both Laura and me standing in front of them!

This is Palm Sunday, the day in which we remember and celebrate Jesus' triumphant entry into the city of Jerusalem. This is also Passion Sunday, the day in which many church services feature the rather lengthy reading of the events of Jesus' final week in Jerusalem, a tale of prayer and betrayal, trial and denial.

As I read over Luke's account of Jesus' passion, I was struck by something I had not noticed before. There is a phrase repeated a few times. That phrase is "at a distance." When Jesus knelt to pray at the Garden of Gethsemane, the gospel says that the disciples were at a distance, a stone's throw away. When Jesus was arrested and taken to the house of the High Priest, the gospel says that Peter followed him at a distance. When Jesus was being beaten and interrogated in an upper chamber, Peter sat below warming himself by the fire-at a distance. When Jesus was sentenced to death and the cross put upon his back, the gospel says that a large crowd of people followed behind- but at a distance. And finally when Jesus died, all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood and watched him, but from a distance.

It appears that while Jesus endured much examination and suffering and rejection and pain during the final week of his life, many of those who followed him, supported him, and loved him kept at a safe distance. Consider again the words of Peter, hours earlier in the security of the Upper Room, "I will follow you no matter what." Oh, he followed all right, but at a distance.

I am reminded of a comedy routine back in the late 60's or early 70's by comedian Flip Wilson. He was talking about his religion and said that he was a member of the group "Jehovah's Bystanders." He said that they asked him to be a witness but he was too afraid to get that involved. If we read carefully read the story of Jesus this week, we will find a lot of bystanders. The passion story in Luke is filled with those who keep their safe distance and those who simply remain silent. Like those in Jerusalem during the final week of Jesus' life, we can all probably find plenty of reasons to keep our distance from Jesus.

We might prefer the approval of people more than the approval of God. We are like our teenagers who will go with us to the mall but then do not want to be seen with us. We lag behind God several safe steps so that our faith is not to be noticed by anyone, but yet we stay close enough to call if we really need something.

Following Jesus closely just isn't a priority. Our time is filled with things we have to do or at least really want to do. We are distracted, we lose our focus, and we drift so far behind we can't really participate in what is happening immediately around Jesus. Following Jesus is somewhat easy at the beginning of our journey. But when it turns into a marathon of life we can drift apart, creating distance.

We don't want to make the difficult choices. We fear the pain and sacrifice of following too close to Jesus. We don't want to honestly look at ourselves, at our selfishness and our addictions. We love our things too much. We love ourselves too much to have to change. We look for loopholes and we try to cut corners. We turn into admirers of Jesus rather than followers.

We may even be afraid that we are not good enough to follow. We might believe that we are not capable enough of fitting the job description of disciple, of close follower. And so we lag a few steps behind. We sit to the back of the room. We watch the action intently, but from behind the next available clearance rack in the neighboring department of the store. We follow, but at a distance.

Thomas John Carlisle writes from the perspective of one Palm Sunday observer. It would perhaps be our perspective if we would have been street side during Jesus' triumphant entry years ago. "Why should I join an indecent demonstration, chanting loud folk songs, defoliating trees, messing up the highway, and inspiring officialdom with hysterics at the rampage? I no more than they desire to welcome some fool who will upset my money changing and my preoccupation with other things. I shall carry no signs of his seditious coming nor should I shout hosanna even once." Carlisle's words beg some important questions of us. Are we too sophisticated to make fools of ourselves and shout hosanna for the Son of God? Are we too enmeshed with how things are right now that we really don't want to make the effort to create the change this Christ brings? Is our attitude of faith so rational, so calculated that we wouldn't be caught waving a palm branch at anybody? Do we believe that a call to discipleship is so restrictive that we just can't follow too close behind? Are we followers-followers from a distance?

As we observe the triumphant entry of Jesus on this Palm Sunday, and as we contemplate the events of his last week in the Holy City, we must consider our own level of identification with Jesus. Can we actually get close to him and to what is going on this week? Can we let loose of our inhibitions and wave a palm branch to celebrate his presence in our life? Can we find the strength to pray beside him in the garden of our earthly struggle? Can we discover the wisdom to defend him in the court of our culture? Can we summon the courage to stand beside him and share in his pain from the foot of the cross? This is the week to ask a lot of questions. Can we follow, not at a distance, but right behind?