

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

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Palm Sunday

“WHAT KIND OF PARADE?”

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### Matthew 21:1-11

21When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup>saying to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says anything to you, just say this, “The Lord needs them.” And he will send them immediately.’ <sup>4</sup>This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

<sup>5</sup>‘Tell the daughter of Zion,  
Look, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’

<sup>6</sup>The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup>they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup>A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup>The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!’

<sup>10</sup>When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’ <sup>11</sup>The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’

The old saying goes, “Everybody loves a parade.” No matter how young or old you are, a parade stirs excitement in your heart and in your soul. You may not realize it but each and every Sunday we have a parade here in church. We open our worship with the worship leaders walking down the center aisle. Soon the acolytes and choir make their processional. This Sunday we made things a little more obvious with our young people parading down the aisle in honor of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem long ago.

With Maren home last week we were watching some old family videos. One of them was when I took the girls up to my hometown of Stanton, Michigan for the celebration of Old Fashioned Days. Old Fashioned Days is one of those summer events that are held in most small towns. There is usually a talent show, some kiddie rides, mud volleyball, a softball tournament, a beer tent, and of course- the parade. All the essentials of good fun, right? If you’ve been around a small town then you know what I am talking about.

The parade took place early on Saturday afternoon. We had to arrive almost an hour early to set up our lawn chairs and secure a good viewing place on Main Street on the lawn of the county's Court House. And then we waited and waited for the grand parade to begin. At the time Maren and Amelia did not like the waiting part. They had their eyes on the kiddie rides and the snow cones and the face painting. But I told them to be patient because the parade would be exciting.

Finally we heard the drum beats and the police sirens and the parade began. There was the sheriff's car, a couple of firetrucks, the high school band, the VFW, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, tractors and horses, some antique cars, a couple of honored citizens in a shiny convertible, and some racing cows from Carson City(don't ask me, ask Neil Huyck!). That was the entire Old Fashioned Days Parade. It was over pretty quickly. I remember Amelia saying, "What kind of parade was that?" Maren was more specific. "Where were the floats, the queens, the balloons and the candy?" I sensed that this parade wasn't the kind they imagined or even the kind that their father was advertising.

I thought about that day when I read over the details of that parade in Jerusalem long ago. Jesus, having earned some kind of reputation with his miracles, healings, and teachings, arrived at the holy city. Everyone there was anxious to catch a glimpse of him. Expectations ran rampant. Perhaps he was the Messiah, God's chosen one bringing the Kingdom of God into reality. Perhaps he was a gifted political leader, one to stand up to the abuse of the Roman authority. As Jesus entered

Jerusalem, the adoring crowd cut branches from the trees and waved them into the air. They threw their garments onto the street ahead of him. They shouted at the top of their lungs, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" There were no racing cows but things like that don't happen in places other than Stanton!

Yet there was something unexpected about this parade too. There was something disappointing about the guest of honor. In many ways he wasn't what the crowd was expecting. He wasn't riding in a convertible, a chariot, or upon a magnificent white steed. He rode a lowly donkey. He didn't offer a speech and accept the key to the city with his hand upraised in victory. He remained silent through it all. He didn't stand with the city and temple dignitaries for a photo opportunity and to gather their support to make himself look legitimate. According to Matthew he went to the Temple and threw out the moneychangers, upsetting the establishment the authorities. It is no wonder that the author of Matthew quotes voices in the crowd that day asking the question, "Who is he?" Many others might have been asking, "What kind of parade is this?" Even on that day of apparent triumph, Jesus didn't seem to be what the crowd expected or wanted. It wasn't that kind of parade.

Even for us, this is a day of mystery. Palm Sunday is one of the more difficult Sundays to preach. There is a dual message. It is Palm Sunday- a day to cheer, wave a branch and shout hosanna. Yet it is Palm Sunday- a day to reflect upon the Passion story and what is in store for Jesus in his arrest and crucifixion. What kind of day is this

supposed to be? There is something to cheer about. Yet there is also something to bring somber reflection. What kind of parade is this supposed to be? Is this a parade of triumphant victory or one which moves fatefully toward suffering and death?

Harvard University chaplain Peter Gomes speaks of the dual nature of Palm Sunday. He says that our heads want it to be a day of victory, a festive dress rehearsal for an Easter triumph. Most Christians today stay home from Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services so we want Palm Sunday to warm us up for the big event next weeks. The parade has to include floats and balloons and waving beauty queens. We want it to be as the expectant crowd anticipated it, a parade of Jesus' complete victory, a parade that led to quick and easy change in the world. But as we watch, our hearts understand the truth. Our hearts focus on what is to come for Jesus in the week ahead, the sacrifices and sufferings that are yet to come. And that picture is not so pretty.

What kind of parade is this? It is a difficult parade to watch and a most confusing parade to celebrate. Gomes adds that the only thing we can be certain about on Palm Sunday is the arrival of God's love in the person of Jesus the Christ. We don't know whether to celebrate or to be afraid but we do know that God is present in the parade. Perhaps by watching Jesus humbly ride by, we do learn something. We learn that God's love will not take away our conflict, our suffering, and our pain. Instead God's love will make such things possible to bear, to understand, to share, and to pass through.

The Palm Sunday parade is not just a victory lap around Jerusalem. Nor is it just the first step toward evitable death for Jesus. This day and this parade is more about how Jesus lived in the face of all that was happening around him and to him. He did not succumb to the temptation to be a champion, to be a hero lifted above the struggle. He remained humble even to death. He believed it was important to speak and to live God's truth- even if that truth threatened his popularity and even his life. Jesus continued to trust in God, even in a time of terrible uncertainty, when the world was crumbling down around him. For me, this Palm Sunday parade was a quiet reminder of God's presence in all things, in the midst of celebration and struggle. It is a lesson that God's victory will come not in worldly popularity and the avoidance of tragedy and pain. It is a lesson that God's victory will also not come in senselessness of human violence and in acts of denial and betrayal. God's victory will come when we live in brokenness and uncertainty, trusting that God is there, knowing that God will redeem our pain and hurts and bring meaning to our struggles. Palm Sunday is a day to embrace humble trust, to realize the presence of God in laughter and in tears.

I recall a hospice in Salt Lake City where many of my friends and church members spent their last days and hours. There was a harpist there who would enter the room after the resident had died, and as the family prayed and contemplated the moment in silence, she would fill the room with heavenly sound. After a few minutes she would quietly leave. One time, after praying with the family, I decided to follow the

harpist out of the room to thank her for her good service. I found her in the lobby of the hospice, sitting by the fireplace playing again. This time some of the residents and their family members came out of their rooms and took their place on couches to listen and to enjoy the beautiful music. When she finished playing, the gathered crowd broke into polite but appreciative applause. In just a few moments the music of death and tears had turned into the music of life and joy. It seemed for a moment to be a contradiction. Like that Palm Sunday parade there were hints of both victory and defeat. Yet it suddenly dawned on me that this was indeed the power of God at work. It was a moment of pain and loss, placed in the hands of God, now redeemed by the promise of life. Just as Jesus did in his final week in Jerusalem, when we place the uncertain and painful moments of living in the hands of God, when we trust in God's presence through all our experiences, we can find each moment redeemed by the power of everlasting life.

Who is this man? What kind of parade is this? Those questions may be what this Palm Sunday parade is all about. It is a day to know that life in itself is at best ambiguous. It is a day full of contradictions that our normal human wisdom and knowledge cannot decipher. But it is a day to understand again that Jesus was one who humbly entered our experience to share in our joy and our suffering. And through his example we can learn what it means to trust in God. This is what the Palm Sunday parade teaches: live well in the moment that you have. Be faithful in the face of all adversity. Take care of the business God has given you even when

things appear to be crumbling about you.

What kind of parade is this? It is a parade to remind us that there is something beyond redeeming both life's victories and sorrows. Ride on, O Jesus. Ride on into the very midst of our life.