

“Marching”

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[Matthew 21:1-11](#)

“Celebrate good times, come on! It’s a celebration!” Some of you know those lyrics, I imagine. They are from an early 1980s song called “Celebrate” by the group “Kool and the Gang.” It was the number one song on the Billboard chart for two weeks in February 1981. And I think the sentiment is certainly appropriate for today and for next Sunday. We are here to celebrate Jesus. Today, we celebrate His triumphal entry into Jerusalem and next Sunday we will celebrate His resurrection.

What is tied to that song in my memory are my college years spent playing in the pep band for the Memphis Tigers. After every victory, we’d play “Celebrate” just after the time expired. The team did pretty well in those years, so we played that song quite often. It became engrained in my mind.

The seminary I attended, Memphis Theological Seminary, is a diverse seminary. When I was a student there, the student body represented over thirty Christian denominations. One day in my Worship and Preaching class, a classmate from a different tradition led us in observing the Lord’s Supper. Now, keep in mind my comment about diverse backgrounds. She began by telling us that the Lord’s Supper is a celebration and we were all on board with her. Then, she turned around to a CD player and pressed play, causing the room to be filled with the sounds of Kool and the Gang, singing “Celebrate.” She kept it playing while we took communion – “Celebrate good times, come on!” It certainly led us to a different emotional state for communion than the typical somber mood. I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t choose to replicate her method, though her point was a good one and has stuck with me: We come to worship to celebrate!

Today, we celebrate Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and we think about how that might have taken place. We might think of the modern parallel of the "red carpet." You know what it is like: yard after yard of red carpet is spread out before the entrance to some big event. We usually see it outside an event like the Academy Awards. The crowds line the carpet and wait anxiously for their favorite star to go by, and the stars oblige by dressing in the fanciest of outfits, created by top designers just for the occasion. They arrive in limousines, chauffeured by men in tuxedos. It is quite a spectacle.

We might think of the spectacle described in today's gospel in similar terms. I remember when growing up in the church how we children would process in on Palm Sunday, waving our palm branches and shouting "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna! Hosanna!"

What a grand and glorious event! And the truth is, that is certainly *part* of what takes place that day on Jesus' way toward Jerusalem. Matthew, Mark and John all tell us of the crowds spreading branches on the ground, with John telling us that they were from palm trees. The crowds spread their cloaks upon the ground in homage to Jesus. They shouted "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" But the story is not as glamorous as we might have portrayed it. No, the cloaks spread on the ground are no substitute for the fancy red carpet. And none of the gospels mention Jesus' clothing, but we can safely assume he wasn't wearing something created by a top designer. The praises shouted are not quite what we might think, either. "Hosanna" does not mean something like "You are the best" or "We love you" or "Love your outfit. Who's the designer?" No, "Hosanna" means "Save, now!" The crowds *were* praising Jesus, no doubt, but they were also *begging* Him to save them from the repression and oppression of the Roman Empire. And what about Jesus' transportation? No fancy limousine, chauffeured by someone wearing a tuxedo. No, Jesus was riding on a donkey. And not even an adult donkey, but a young colt. Perhaps the equivalent to the limousine would have been a large horse, a stallion of

appropriate stature for a person of honor. But Jesus came into town, riding on the back of a young borrowed donkey, in his ordinary everyday clothing, while the donkey walked across the ground which was covered with branches and people's dirty cloaks. Maybe this is not the red carpet treatment, after all.

The whole scene is a fulfillment of what was written in the book of Zechariah, and Matthew even quotes some of that for us. In Zechariah chapter 9, verses 9-10, we read:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!  
 Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he,  
 humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.  
 He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem;  
 and the battle-bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations;  
 his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

This shows us the kind of king that Jesus was – not a mighty warrior who would overthrow the Roman Empire, but the Prince of Peace. “He shall command peace to the nations,” Zechariah tells us.

The shouts of praise that the people are quoted with come from Psalm 118, of which parts are familiar to many. It begins “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!” The Psalm continues “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” And then the next two verses are the ones the people shouted. In the NRSV translation of Psalm 118, it says “Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” *“Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!”* But most of the people did not know what kind of salvation Jesus came to bring them. Perhaps they were doing the best version of the red carpet treatment that the culture and time provided them. Maybe they were guilty of the kind of gushing adulation that we shower on the celebrities of our day. We want them to save us, too – save us from the everyday circumstances of our lives; let us live vicariously through the glitz and glamour of the celebrity life. The people of Jesus' time

wanted Jesus to take away their afflictions suffered living under Roman rule, but Jesus came to take away much greater afflictions than they could imagine.

Perhaps they should have seen the clues in the life of Jesus prior to this point. He did tell them to turn the other cheek and not to cast stones at another unless they were without sin. He did tell them “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” and “Blessed are the peacemakers.” And then, there’s that lowly donkey He was riding. He chose not the mighty stallion that would indicate military might, but the lowly donkey, indicating peace and humility.

But the people did not understand these signs and so when they chanted praise to Jesus as He entered Jerusalem, they were cheering on a different kind of leader than Jesus came to be. And that is why we have the turnaround of Good Friday, just a few days later. When the crowds figured out that Jesus was not going to overthrow the Roman Empire, that He was not going to be the type of leader they were looking for, they turned their backs on Him and He was condemned to death.

So, no, I don’t believe the story of Palm Sunday is about the red carpet treatment. The more we turn Palm Sunday into some red carpet celebrity gala, the more we forget that following Jesus is supposed to lead us *away* from the red carpets. We are following Jesus on the road, but we must keep in mind the road that we are on. It is not the road to riches and glory and red carpets here on earth, but it is the road to salvation greater than any earthly riches we could imagine.

And so I say “Hosanna” – Lord Jesus, “save us”. Save us from our misconceptions and preconceived notions of who you are supposed to be, so that we may be attuned to who you truly are. Today, let us wave our palm branches high in the air for our King Jesus and say “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.” And yet, we know what this week holds. We know that we too will turn our backs on Jesus. We know that after the triumphal entry of Palm Sunday always comes the suffering of Good Friday.

And so, there's no red carpet here, no one-of-a-kind gowns designed just for today, no limousines. Just a group of people gathered to welcome our savior, saying "Celebrate good times, come on! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!"

And then we must continue to follow Jesus after the parade ends, after the red carpets have been rolled up and the tuxedos returned. Jesus continues onward on the journey that He knows he must take – the path to the cross – and we must follow. As Jesus said "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." And so, we began today by waving our palm branches, but end by remembering that after the parade came the crucifixion. To honor the Son of God, waving palm branches is not nearly enough. We start there, but we continue onward by following in the footsteps of Jesus. This is Holy Week. It is the most important week in the life of the church. Don't just take it as any other week. Read the story again. Spend time in prayer and meditation. Join us for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services. Remember that, as Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, Jesus, "Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross." And remember that this is not the end of the story, as we will gather again next Sunday in celebration of the resurrection. But for now, we march onward from the parade toward the cross, following in the footsteps of our Lord. Amen