

## **“Celebrating what is Good”**

Matthew 21:1-11

Rev. Rob MacDougall

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Don't you love a parade? A big string of people moving from one place to another, singing, shouting, waving things. There is lots of energy in a parade. The energy is expressed in the walking and making noise, but I think the energy comes from the shared purpose and the public expression of that purpose.

There is energy in the unguarded proclamation of something that gives us joy, something that lifts us up, something that makes us feel alive and free.

The original Palm Sunday was filled with this kind of energy and spirit. The parade was comprised of an odd assortment of people from all around the Middle East; people who lived around the Sea of Galilee, people who lived in the suburbs of Jerusalem, people who farmed, herded livestock, begged, ran businesses, fished and collected taxes. Those who followed Jesus came from all walks of life, they were young and old, rich and poor, male and female, and together they were a real scandal.

The Palm Sunday crowd wasn't bashful though. From a hill that rose above the eastern wall of the city of Jerusalem, the Palm Sunday crowd and parade made themselves visible and heard. There was no sneaking in the backdoor of the city, Jesus' bunch was exuberant, joyful, inviting. Even though they were entering a city where people were supposed to know their proper place and were expected to stay in it, the community of Jesus could not keep quiet. They had been experiencing amazing things, things that were making them feel alive, valuable, cared for, liberated. They cheered Jesus on, not just because they thought he was God's son, but because he made them feel like God's loved sons and daughters.

When the leaders of the temple told Jesus to quiet the people, he said "I can't, and even if I tried the stones would cry out."

My guess is that the Rev. William Sloan Coffin, who was one of the leading voices in the anti-nuclear movement in the U.S., would have loved Palm Sunday. He wrote: "So why are Christians today so often so joyless? It is, I think, because too

often Christians have only enough religion to make themselves miserable. Guilt they/we know, but not forgiveness. Nietzsche correctly noted, 'Christians should look more redeemed.'"

I think Coffin would have said the Palm Sunday crowd looked and sounded joyful because they honestly felt redeemed. The Palm Sunday crowd had actually experienced something good and they were making it known to others. The loving God had come to them in the person of Jesus and because of this the world they lived in changed. They were the lost who had been found, the prisoners that had been released, the hungry had been fed, the grieved who were comforted – so they cheered and waved branches.

In recent years many Christian churches have said Palm Sunday should be called Passion Sunday and the story of Jesus' betrayal and abuse should be emphasized on the Sunday before Easter. In part these church people want this shift in focus because few people attend Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services anymore, so they miss the story of Jesus' great sacrifice. I understand this argument and the importance of knowing that people can be and are cruel and destructive, even toward the innocent and forgiving.

But I also believe that the overt and unrelenting Palm Sunday celebration is vitally important. Karoline Lewis writes that "Palm Sunday could be a moment of faith that happens too infrequently...The waving of Palms, scattering of cloaks and shouts of Hosanna are exposed, joyous expressions of belief." This simple procession of gratitude proclaims the nature of God's kingdom, it shouts the good news that Jesus offered. While Jesus, the crowd and all of us are not naïve regarding the reception this good news gets from the powers that be, singing and waving branches joyfully exposes what captures the human heart.

It is clear that the jubilation of the first Palm Sunday crowd emanated from their experiences of great love and compassion. The crowd may have included the people who experienced thousands being fed with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish, and it could have included the ten healed lepers, the man who picked up his pallet and walked, the woman whose flow of blood stopped, the prodigal son and his brother, the people from the wedding at Cana, the children whom Jesus welcomed, and all the others that God touched through Jesus. Jesus asked, "who is most grateful, the one who has been forgiven little or the one who

has been forgiven a great deal?" The crowd was filled with people who had received grace upon grace and their gratitude was immense.

Palm Sunday is most joyful for those whose hearts are captured by the gifts of grace, compassion, wonder, justice and love. If our hearts and minds cannot locate the times when we have seen, experienced or offered these gifts, our Palm Sunday proclamation will lack tangible grounding. We need to know what the gifts of God's kingdom feel like.

For me, God's grace often emerges in surprising and subtle places. And the nature of this grace is that it moves me from loneliness and loss, toward connection and joy.

Many of you know that my father died about 5 months ago. He was just turning 94 when he died. He lived a long life. I never expected him to live as long as he did. The last 5-6 years of his life became more and more of a struggle. He moved from a condominium where he lived alone, to a senior living facility, to a couple of assisted living homes and finally to a nursing home. Each move was prompted by greater need for care of various kinds. My siblings, our spouses, and I worried about dad a great deal during these years.

When he finally died we all grieved, but we were also glad that his struggles were ended and he was at peace.

But a parent's death, especially when it is the second parent's death, creates a kind of loneliness unlike all others. It is the loneliness of not having the people who have known you forever, not having the people who you think will be interested in your life, the loneliness of feeling a kind of rootlessness.

My mom died 27 years ago and dad's death was like losing her again. In dad's few belongings we found a couple of my mom's diaries from her late teens and early twenties. I recently started reading mom's diaries consisting of brief daily entries that were more fact than reflection. In the spring of 1936 my mom recorded the first time she met my dad and then what they did during the first year of their relationship. In one entry she said that my dad told her he loved her, and a few months later she recorded saying she loved him.

When I read these entries about their young lives, I felt my loneliness for them fade and a gentle sense of contentment wash over me. It was a moment of grace for me. Their deaths no longer made me feel orphaned because I felt the bond that had been forged in all the joys and disappointments of our lives together. They still feel real to me.

There are a whole host of things that cause me to cheer on this Palm Sunday. There are times when I have felt forgiveness for my insensitivity and cruelty, there are acts of courage and compassion that I have seen people offer, there are voices of people who speak of peace and justice, but this morning I also cheer because God's grace includes memories and emotional bonds that can heal our loneliness. I cheer in part, because we have been created with the capability of feeling the presence of others in our hearts even when they are physically absent.

Karen Lewis wonders whether the Christian church has begun to "liturgically endorse suffering over celebration, and affliction over adoration..." Palm Sunday is an anecdote to any such movement. Palm Sunday is an essential celebration of all the good that we have and will experience. It is easy to succumb to the weight of life, but we are people who are redeemed, we are people who don't carry the burdens of life alone and who are given amazing gifts.

Palm Sunday is a day to let your spirit sing knowing full well the mix of life. Today we celebrate what is good in life – grace and compassion, forgiveness and mercy, joy and laughter. Today we celebrate life, today guilt is pushed aside because the central message of our faith and our God is love not fear, it is truth not lies, it is peace not violence, it is mercy not narcissism.