

Sermon ✝ April 2, 2023

Matthew 21:1-11

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I don't know about you, but this Palm Sunday parade always seems a bit out of place for me. I mean it just doesn't seem to fit into the story. What if in a particularly dramatic movie scene . . . like the scene in *Sophie's Choice* on the train platform where she has to choose which child she is going to keep . . . what if the main characters were to suddenly break into a song and dance routine. Weird, right? Likewise, this parade is so unexpected . . . so impulsive. But, maybe that's the point.

One criticism that is often leveled against *predictable* Episcopalians and Lutherans is that our worship services are so calculated, so safe, so lacking any kind of spontaneous emotion. At least . . . many in that first-century crowd were sufficiently free to act on their impulse to rejoice in God.

Parades have a way of stirring up emotions and releasing us from inhibitions. The crowd waved palm branches, spread their garments on the road, made an impressively spontaneous demonstration of self-forgetfulness. A line from *Jesus Christ, Superstar* sung by that first Palm Sunday crowd says it all, "*Christ you know I love you. Did you see I waved?*"

But as with so many of these lessons from scripture, there are many layers to this story. The first layer *is* the reminder that we need always to open to the unexpected.

It is possible to take the gospel seriously and causes around it seriously, without taking ourselves so seriously. We need to lighten up to love and laugh. Churches often seem to preach grace but practice only law. We tend to stay underwhelmed because we refuse to be overwhelmed by the incredible good news of the gospel.

When I was first ordained, an old pastor's advice to me was, "*Expect the worst, and then you'll never be disappointed.*"

Mistakes of passion can be overcome far easier than sins of inertia. Palm Sunday reminds us to *seize the moment*, even if it makes us late or truant for something else.

When Zacchaeus of Jericho heard that Jesus was coming to town, he shut down his tax office and climbed a tree . . . and that day changed his whole life. "*Christ, you know I love you. Did you see I waved?*"

Remember that Martha was so intent on keeping the meal on schedule that she missed the unrepeatable opportunity to enjoy a moment with her Lord.

Don't apologize for spontaneous celebrations . . . just *be* spontaneous.

Remember Søren Kierkegaard's story of the geese sequestered in a yard . . . Every seventh day the geese paraded to a corner of the yard, and their most eloquent orator got up on the fence and spoke of the wonders of geese. He told of the exploits of their forebearers who dared to mount up on wings and fly all over the sky. He spoke of the mercy of the creator who had given geese wings and the instinct to fly. This deeply impressed the geese, who nodded their heads solemnly. All this they did. One thing they did not do: they did not fly, for the corn was good and the barnyard secure.

However passing it was, Palm Sunday provided, people with a chance to fly. *"Christ, you know I love you. Did you see I waved?"*

Now this may seem like a logical place to leave this sermon . . . but there is more . . . another layer. The cross: the nails and the scars of the Passion. We proclaim a theology of the cross. Simply stated: No cross, no crown.

Such talk is not always popular . . . not even with *good* church folks. Many people are on the prowl for a painless, cost-free faith . . . an ouch-less Christianity.

But if, *and when*, we are true to the calling of our faith; we know that many things do not come easy in this life.

For after all . . . what can the dawn mean to one who has not endured the night? What can restoration mean to those who have never suffered separation? What can resurrection mean to those who have not, in some sense, died?

Years ago, during the boys state basketball championship, I received a phone call from a colleague who was serving a church in Appleton. Luther informed me that South Shore High School had made it to the finals. At different times in our ministry's, both Luther and I had served the small parish in the town of Port Wing where the high school is located. We went to the game and we cheered on the Cardinals of South Shore.

Reflecting on the game over lunch, we realized how removed we now were from this small community where we once had lived and how this distance now affected our ability to cheer fully for our team. We were outsiders. Most of the players weren't even born when we had served this parish.

We didn't know this team in the same way the fans did: they were all well acquainted with the struggles; the long hours of practice; the wins and the losses that were all a part of their making it to state. They knew the agony, so they celebrated the ecstasy in a way that Luther and I never could.

We almost felt guilty . . . we had crashed the party. We had shown up at the victory bash without participating in any of the preparations for it. No cross, no crown!

Easter is not indiscriminately radiant. It is not some portable happy ending that can be hitched to just any story. It will have little meaning for those who lightly crash the celebration . . . for those who choose not to participate nor remember the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

*"Christ, you know I love you. Did you see I waved?"*

"Yes", he replies. And then *he* asks *us* if we saw him suffer and die.

Easter is ready when you are! But no cross, no crown!