



**“Was It a Harmless Parade?”**

**Scripture – Mark 11:1-10**

**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, March 24, 2024**

Can you picture Jesus at the head of this populist procession heading down the Mount of Olives and up into Jerusalem? Can you imagine Jesus riding slowly while his supporters shout: “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a small colt, his closest followers encircling him. People were waving palm branches and some threw their cloaks on the ground in front of him – the equivalent of a poor man’s red carpet treatment. Parents hoisted their children up on their shoulders so that they could view the spectacle.

What was going on? Why the fanfare? Jesus and his followers had entered countless communities before. What was different about *this* entrance?

Some have remade this event into something akin to a Thanksgiving Day parade. We wave palm branches as if they were pom-poms and shout “Hosanna!” with the same cheery enthusiasm we would howl, “Hooray!” Admittedly, we are missing the floats and the giant helium-filled cartoon characters floating overhead, but we know the atmosphere that surrounds a parade.

However, I fear that over time, the church has siphoned off the vigor of that first Palm Sunday processional by replacing the original event with something far tamer. The Disney veneer that has been tacked on belies the essence of what Jesus and his followers were up to the day.

Make no mistake. Jesus’ entry into the Holy City was no spur of the moment decision. He carefully calculated his entrance.

During the course of his ministry, Jesus visited numerous villages in Palestine. However, at some point, he heard God’s whisper in his soul to chart his course for Jerusalem. And once Jesus was in the vicinity of the heavy-weight city, he planned his appearance to coincide with the Passover Feast. This was the great religious festival when Jews celebrated God liberating them from slavery in Egypt. Pilgrims from as far away as Damascus and Babylon and Athens streamed into the city swelling the population to four

or five times its normal size. Now that the people were living under the oppressive regime of Rome, they dreamt of another liberation.

Each year, this was the worst week on Pontius Pilate's calendar. With more than 200,000 Jews celebrating an earlier freedom from bondage, Jerusalem was a tinder box that any spark might ignite. It fell to Pilate, the Roman governor of the territory to insure that nothing went haywire.

Pilate actually lived 60 miles west of Jerusalem in a posh villa overlooking the pristine turquoise waters of the Mediterranean. Each year at Passover, he marched up into Jerusalem with a show of force to remind everyone who was in charge. Surrounded by armed soldiers, Pilate rode through the west gate of Jerusalem atop a mighty stallion. Onlookers gathered along the side of the road to witness – and most likely shudder – at this intimidating display of muscle. I picture the scene similar to those black and white newsreels from the thirties and forties that showed waves of Nazis marching through cities in Europe.

First century Jews despised the Romans who subdued them with strict laws, tormented them with heavy taxes, and terrorized them with occasional brutality. The people longed for the Messiah to appear and set things right. Many imagined that the Messiah would come with an equally impressive army and topple the Romans. They yearned for a king who would deliver justice and peace.

A colleague says that when Jesus rode into Jerusalem to the cheers of his followers, it was a parade of hope. Some parades are merely entertainment. "People throw beads and other things at entertainment parades. But if the parade is about truth, if it is a parade about our lives together, then parades tend to be about hope. Of course, if it is about hope, it is also a parade of threat because no matter what change is desired, there are people who do not want the change."<sup>1</sup>

Although it had the feel of a parade – people shouting and waving branches torn from palm trees, the procession into Jerusalem was not really a parade. At least, that's not what we would call it today. We would say it was a protest march. Like marches we've seen in this country over the past few years – marches supporting women's rights, marches against racism and gun violence, and the marches we are seeing today against the ongoing war in Gaza – the procession into Jerusalem was a provocative march against the status quo: the oppression of the Romans and the collusion of the religious leaders.

Jesus challenged current conditions. He chastised leaders who were more concerned about their position than about people. Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan? The bad guys in the parable were the priest and the Levite. They avoided helping the man who was beaten and left half dead because they thought it might defile them. Remember the invectives Jesus hurled against those who were rich and ignored the poor? Remember how he skewered the Pharisees for scrupulously following contrived rituals but neglecting justice?

Jesus carefully choreographed his entrance into the Holy City. Pilate entered from the west, Jesus entered from the east. Pilate strutted in atop a mighty steed, Jesus lumbered in on a lowly colt. Pilate entered surrounded by crack soldiers, Jesus entered surrounded by fisherman, farmers, at least one tax collector and a handful of women. Pilate's troops wielded swords and spears, Jesus' contingent brandished palm branches. Pilate's army hailed Caesar, Jesus' crew shouted "Hosanna!"

It is vital to note that "Hosanna!" does not mean "Hooray" or "Alleluia!" It means "save us" or "deliver us." That is, the people were calling on Jesus to deliver them from the Roman occupation. And when they

called him “Son of David,” their legendary king and mightiest military leader, it was tantamount to treason. Later in the week, after Jesus was arrested and dragged before Pilate, remember what Pilate asked him? Are you the King of the Jews?

The day Jesus entered Jerusalem was the day his followers changed from passive observers to active protesters. Up to this point, his followers had been almost exclusively onlookers. They had watched Jesus heal, they had listened to him teach, they had witnessed him confronting religious leaders; but they had fallen short on action. Palm Sunday was the day they engaged in peaceful resistance. It was the moment when they very publicly announced their allegiance not to Caesar, but to Jesus; not to Rome, but to the Kingdom of God.

One theologian writes, “Those Hosannas were the hopeful cries of people seeking freedom. Those Hosannas were an investment of hope in the one they believed could deliver.”<sup>2</sup> And I would add: Those Hosannas were not muffled by the harsh reality of the world they knew. They were shouts of hope for the world they were seeking. Jesus envisioned a world where love ruled, where all were treated fairly, and where all would live together in harmony.

It is not easy to hang onto hope when everything around you seems hopeless, but we followers of Jesus cling to hope, because we believe God never tires from leading the world to a better day. No matter how many obstacles we humans construct, God keeps presenting us with work-arounds to circumvent our disasters and lead us toward the light.

A colleague tells about a fascinating fact she learned while vacationing in the Italian Alps. “In 1848 construction began on a railroad pathway through a portion of the Alps called, *The Semmering*. The goal was to connect Venice with Vienna, allowing for easy transportation of goods and people from the coast to interior Europe.”

“To no one’s surprise, many said it could not be done. The mountains were too steep. The risk of avalanche, too great. The winter months, too hard for construction, and the elevation far too high. But still, the projects designer, Carl von Ghega, pressed on.”

“After seven years of construction, the rail line consisted of 14 tunnels, 16 viaducts, 100 stone arches, and 11 bridges. It had been worked on by 20,000 construction workers. But finally, the project, once deemed impossible, was complete. Europe had their first train track crossing of the Alps.”

“While the construction of this daunting project is more than impressive, the thing that is more amazing is the fact that when the rail pass was built, there was not a train in existence capable of making the trip. At the time they built the track, no trains could handle the steep elevation, or the sharp turns. Four different locomotives were tried, and all failed, forcing train companies to build and design a new train with the strict goal of conquering that mountain pass.”

“Those 20,000 workers from Austria, Italy, and Germany, came together day after day in miserable conditions, to build a track for a train that did not yet exist. Which can only mean that those construction workers truly believed, deep in their bones, that someday a train would come.”

“It takes a lot of hope to live like that.”<sup>3</sup> But you can take that 7 ½ hour train ride today for 28 euros.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, we read: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “If you lose hope, you lose that vitality that keeps life moving, you lose the courage to be, and the quality that helps you go on in spite of all.” And so he would not give up on his dream of a better day.

Followers of Jesus say “Yes” to life and trust that God leads us to a better day. Even when we cannot see it, even when we cannot put our hands on it, we lean into the future believing that the Kingdom of God is slowly taking root. You either live in hope or you live in despair. Which will it be for you?

#### NOTES

1. Tom Are, Jr. “Business as Usual, or Not?” March 25, 2018.
2. Liz Crumlish, “Let’s Stay with the Hosannas,” *Spring*, (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2019), p. 189.
3. Sarah Are Speed, “Are You the One?” *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 2024, p.20.

### **Palm Sunday Prayer ~ Gregory Knox Jones**

Loving God, our Lenten journey is winding down as we remember the final week of Jesus. He gathered with his followers in Bethany to secure a colt for his momentous ride. On the back of this humble animal he rode down the Mount of Olives and then up into the Holy City surrounded by supporters. He bypassed a grand stallion in favor of a humble colt. In harmony with your will, he refused to project the coercive power of force, in favor of the persuasive power of love.

He calculated his entrance to coincide with the Passover Feast when his people celebrated their liberation from Egypt centuries earlier. Now, they dreamt of freedom from the Roman occupation and hoped Jesus was the one to usher in a new realm – a virtuous realm based on divine principles.

We are awed by the courage of Jesus to face his adversaries armed only with love and truth and a passion for justice. God, if we could muster just a fraction of his fearlessness, we would draw closer to the life you beckon us to live. We would reject self-indulgent ways and love without restraint. We would dismiss self-serving fiction and seek your truth. We would spurn favored status and devote ourselves to the common good. Lord, inspire us to become more faithful in following the way Jesus showed us.

Everlasting God, there are times when the evils of our day overwhelm us. We witness countless acts of violence, greed, bigotry, deceit, and injustice. We often plead for you to right the wrongs; yet, we know you call on us to resist evil and to shed light where darkness reigns. You command us to love with Christ-like love, to promote justice, and to strive for peace.

Eternal energy of the universe, fill us with courage to stand against abusive power; fill us with compassion so that we may give ourselves away in love; and fill us with righteousness so that we may work for justice and peace: in our homes, in our communities, and in our world.

And now we join our voices as one in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples and passed on to us, praying: **Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**