

Tragedy and Triumph

Luke 19:29-38

March 24, 2024

Let's look at why Palm Sunday was a tragedy. Excitement was running high in the city as it always did at the time of Passover. But the natural excitement was heightened by this procession, this strange entourage that weaved its way toward the city gates. There at the head rode a man on a donkey. **I wonder... did Jesus' manner match** the excitement of the crowd? All around him the crowds gathered, curious at first, but soon they were shouting and singing and turning the place into one big party for him.

As he entered the city the crowds went wild with cheering. There were shouts of, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." People grabbed anything they could get their hands on. **They tore palm branches from trees.** They removed the cloaks off their back. They threw them in his path like a red carpet. The shouts of hosanna, which meant "**save us now,**" **grew louder.** The green palms waved more and more frantically. Something remarkable was about to happen.

Two elderly, excited Southern women were sitting together in the front pew of church listening to a fiery preacher. When this preacher condemned the sin of stealing, these two ladies cried out at the tops of their lungs, "AMEN, BROTHER!"

When the preacher condemned the sin of lust, they yelled again, "PREACH IT, PASTOR!" And when the preacher condemned the sin of lying, they jumped to their feet and screamed, "RIGHT ON, BROTHER! TELL IT LIKE IT IS...AMEN!"

But then the preacher condemned the sin of gossip, the two got very quiet and sat back down. One turned to the other and said, "He's quit preaching and now he's meddlin'."

Maybe you have been at a sporting event and gotten caught up in the excitement of the moment like these two ladies. But I don't think Jesus did, I think he knew what he was there for and I think he was focused on what would be happening as week progressed.

Singing, shouting confidently, the crowd, swept through the city gates and finally stopped on the plaza in front of the Temple. There, Jesus dismounted. It was the perfect place for Jesus to make his big move, to **do what everyone expected him to do.** The crowd, tense with anticipation, watched his every move now. Some may have glanced toward heaven, looking for the sign that was sure to come. **After all, was this not the Messiah, the Chosen One,** the one who would lead them to overthrow the Roman government and reestablish the Kingdom of Israel?

Can we possibly even imagine the sensation that these people were feeling. We might compare it to the allied armies marching victoriously into Paris after defeating the Nazi's. Maybe the thrill of liberation like the fall of the Berlin Wall. **Jesus was a one man liberation army** that had marched right into the heart of Jerusalem in the midst of these poor troubled people groveling under the oppressive rule of Rome. This was the moment that had kept their faith alive throughout the centuries. **This had been their hope;** this moment had been the inspiration of their worship. They saw Jesus as the right man for the right time.

Then the moment that everyone had been waiting for came. Jesus entered the temple. There was a low murmuring among the crowd as Jesus entered the Temple. The crowd anxiously waited, time passed and more time passed. **The crowd became restless.** What was Jesus going to do? What did Jesus do? I'm going to read verbatim from the Gospel of Mark which tells us exactly what Jesus did. **"He went into the temple, and when he looked around at everything, since the hour was already late, he went out again,"** That was it; he went into the Temple, looked around, turned, and walked back out and left Jerusalem and went back to Bethany. He did nothing.

The crowd was stunned. Perhaps no event in history has built up to a greater anti-climax than Palm Sunday. Then, slowly, one by one, the crowd began to melt away. All that was left was this kind of eerie silence and this empty feeling in the heart. That was the end of their singing and shouting, and the waving of palms. Great expectations were left unfulfilled. It was a tremendous buildup to an equally tremendous let down.

In the centuries of retelling the story of Palm Sunday, it seems to me that we so often miss the point that to the people of first century Palestine the events of that day fell like one big thud. In their eyes Jesus had failed to exploit this one great moment in history. I have to wonder if they felt disillusioned and betrayed.

The crowds wanted a winner; Jesus has other plans. This is the tragedy of Palm Sunday and it sets the tone for his suffering later in the week. There are two expectations being played out. **Two storylines are occurring:** the hope of the people is one and the suffering servant is the other. Jesus could not match his hopes and dreams with theirs. **To pursue a king's crown would defeat the purpose of the cross.** To pursue a sacrificial cross would preclude any chance at an earthly crown.

So, here Jesus stands before this mass of people who are looking to him for leadership. They have just celebrated a kind of King's reception with the palm branches, throwing their robes to the ground in humble subjection to this king. **And Jesus knows he must disappoint them.** He knows he must walk away or they will try to follow through with the ceremonies and pronounce him king. **So begins the suffering.** The crowds will begin to turn against him because of their disappointment over unfulfilled expectations. And for that reason Palm Sunday was not a His Triumph but His Tragedy.

But Palm Sunday was a triumph. Here's why: it marked the triumph of love over hate; because what was expected was war, but what mankind received was sacrifice. **It marked the victory of God in human affairs.** God's agenda triumphed over the human agenda. The reality of the moment is that, **humanity cannot reach up to God so in grace God comes down to where humanity is.** God, in Jesus is not above it all but in the midst of it all. And because of God's presence among us, there is forever a triumph of love over hate, of life over death.

Fifty years ago, there was a special occasion taking place at the White House and all of the living presidents and many other dignitaries were in attendance. But one person who came was shunned and ignored by virtually everyone there. Nobody would look at him much less speak to him. **That person was former president Richard Nixon.** Of course, he had gone through the shame and infamy of Watergate. He was back in Washington for the first time since his resignation from the presidency.

Then a very special thing happened, perhaps the only thing that could have made a difference and broken the ice. Jimmy Carter, who was the President at that time, came into the room. **Before he was seated, he saw Nixon over against the wall,** all by himself. He went over to him as though he were greeting a family member, stuck out his hand to the former president, and smiled broadly. To the surprise of everyone there, the two of them embraced each other, and Carter said, "Welcome home, Mr. President! Welcome home!"

Commenting on that interaction, Newsweek magazine asserted, "If there was a turning point in Nixon's long ordeal in the wilderness of exile, it was that moment and that gesture of love and compassion."

The turning point for us is Palm Sunday. It is our moment of triumph. It was a triumph because God in Jesus decided to ignore our miserable state and act on our behalf. **God chose to ignore the crowd's version of Palm Sunday** and do a much bigger, more significant thing. No matter what we have done: compromised our ethics and morals, sold out to the expediency of the moment, or placed ourselves above others; **God comes into our world and welcomes us home.** We may not deserve to be there but we are welcomed just the same.

Amen.