

The First and Franklin St. Presbyterian Church
 Baltimore, MD
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 Matthew 21:1-11
 Palm Sunday

A Parade for All the World to See

A few of us were sitting around enjoying a beer playing “Can you top that?” The category was rock concerts. One person mentioned seeing “Elton John” and we responded, “Yea, we seen him.” Someone else said how about “U2” in the early days. Impressive but someone else had seen them. I threw in the “Doors” at Madison Square Garden. Good one but not great. Finally having sat quietly through the discussion, smirking because she knew she was holding the trump card, Krista said, “How about the Beatles on their first U.S. tour in Los Angeles?” We all groaned. Nothing could top that - well maybe the original Woodstock - but none of us were there. She had clearly won, hands down.

Deciding what big event one should participate in because of its lasting value is usually just a case of luck. No one really knows the impact it will have on history when one is there. In retrospect I would have loved to hear Martin Luther King, Jr. deliver his “I Have a Dream” speech but I was too young and it was out of my parent’s scope of things they would have thought to attend. No less than something to which they would have thought to take their children. Many of you could tell stories about having been someplace to witness something or someone which later became an historic moment. Perhaps we could share some of those experiences at coffee hour.

In Matthew’s gospel from the beginning of his ministry Jesus was a draw. The crowds sought him out and come from all the regions. Shortly thereafter they were crowded on a mountain listening to his teaching (7:28-29). They were astounded at his authority (Chapters - 7, 9 and 22) and witnessed his ability to heal the sick (Chapters - 12, 14, 15, 19). When he cast out a demon they were amazed and noted; “never has anything like this been seen in Israel.” By chapter twelve they began to wonder whether Jesus might indeed be the Son of David. And then right before the triumphal entrance into Jerusalem - twice Jesus had filled their stomachs with what appeared to be just a few fish and a little bit more bread. (Chapters 14 and 15) The crowd was pumped. They knew when Jesus spoke of entering Jerusalem that being among that crowd was the place to be.

And when at other times Jesus may have left them with more questions than answers, this time he does not disappoint them. In fact he sets them up royally.

It begins with his decision to leave the region of Galilee and go to Jerusalem 110 miles away for the Passover celebration. Jerusalem is the capital city, the city of David, the site of the temple and during this holy season it was packed with people who had made pilgrimages to be there at that time of the year (again, the place to be). They came to worship in the temple and to present their sacrifices to God as a way to celebrate their nation’s freedom from their enslavement in Egypt and their autonomy as God’s chosen people. However, at this point in their history they are no longer free or autonomous but are under the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. So while the mood may be festive it is also volatile. As one could imagine with thoughts of the Passover in mind with patriotism and a sense of nationalism centered on Israel, a resentment and hatred of Roman occupation can’t be that far behind.

The disciples knew this and therefore didn’t want him to go. As an aside, many today still feel uncomfortable when Jesus gets too close to the world of economics, social policy, and politics. Putting religion in the arena of politics makes us nervous. We don’t like to mix them and we would prefer to keep Jesus in the realm of the spiritual.

When they get to the city, Jesus sets them up. He asks them to fetch him a donkey and a colt.

(Matthew's gospel has both, either misinterpreting the parallelism of the Hebrew poetry, where something is said once and then repeated in a slightly different manner or wanting to make sure the reader made the connection without a doubt.) The disciples and the crowd would know the promise of the prophet Zechariah; "Lo, your king comes to you; humble and lowly, riding on a donkey, and a colt, the foal of a donkey." If he was riding both they would all know that Jesus was proclaiming himself to be the Messiah, the King of Israel, the Son of David, the Son of God and their Savior. So as you can imagine the crowd goes wild. This is indeed the biggest of the biggest events since Moses led them through the Reed Sea. They grab what is around them - branches of palm trees and the like and start waving them. They are jumping up and down, laughing, singing and shouting, "Hosanna, to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heaven." Hosanna, yes, hosanna - this is it and we are here and life is good and it can't get much better than this. Hosanna.

This parade ultimately has cosmic consequences for it is not long thereafter (a matter of a few days) until the authorities put their heads together and decide to put a stop to him. So, as we all know; he is arrested, tried, brought to Pontius Pilate, and ultimately executed. The main reason why the Roman leaders are so troubled about this man was that he was a threat to their established rule in Judea. Jesus and his entourage present one world view and the Roman legions another. The question is ultimately who is in charge? God? Or the political rulers the earth? The power represented by Jesus is based on the power of the love of God for all God's children especially for the poor, the outcast, the meek, the hungry, the sick and disabled, the oppressed and imprisoned.

This Palm Sunday story helps us visualize and gives us hints as to where we should find ourselves when we want to be with the crowd which will not only visualize but also impact history. Just a few thoughts:
 - it was a small crowd of the more upper class women who thought the poor inner city children should be taught the stories of Jesus. In order to do that they should learn how to read and so Sunday schools were begun in various city neighborhoods and after a while these grew in number and some developed into congregations and others ultimately became the public school system as we know it today.

- there were other crowds of these same type of women who when they read the Bible saw that Jesus did a fair amount of healing and cared a great deal for the sick and dying and so they started clinics. The Greater Baltimore Medical Center grew out of one such clinic begun by members of this congregation.
- there were crowds of church folk who knew that God wouldn't be pleased with the destruction of God's beautiful world with a war of atomic bombs and so they marched and demonstrated and held parades until the governments heard them and began to talk among each other and sought treaties to curb the insanities of building bigger and better weapons of mass destruction
- there were crowds who marched in Selma, Alabama, and Birmingham, Alabama, and Memphis, TN and Washington DC and in various other cities announcing that all God's children are to be treated with equality and justice.
- there were good church folk who said to one another "Why isn't my gay son or daughter thought to be as good as yours - when I know darn well they are." And they organized and marched and brought acceptance.

So this Palm Sunday I invite you to pick up your palm and join the crowd in search of the parade or gathering where you will find Jesus and where you can bring the love of God to our world.