



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“A PASSION-FILLED PARADE”

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Luke 19:28-40

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, April 14, 2019
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Luke 19:28-40

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, “Why are you untying it?” just say this: “The Lord needs it.”’ So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, ‘Why are you untying the colt?’ They said, ‘The Lord needs it.’ Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying,

‘Blessed is the king

who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heaven,

and glory in the highest heaven!’

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop.’ He answered, ‘I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.’

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

I love the tradition of having the children and friends of First (Scots) parade around the sanctuary during our processional hymn and waving palm branches as they go. It gives us some sense of the excitement that surrounded that particular occasion when Jesus entered the Holy City of Jerusalem on this day a little over 2000 years ago. Imagine having been there on that first Palm Sunday! Pulling up a patch of grass if we were lucky, maybe climbing a small

sycamore tree as had been done before...waiting with great anticipation for Jesus to come down the street. This was, after all, the high noon of Jesus' popularity. In the Gospel according to John, we are told that Passover pilgrims "took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!'"

And why is that? Why all the fuss? Well, there were many reasons, not least of which had to do with the fact that Jesus was so different, for he taught with compassion and clarity. The Bible tells us he taught with authority and not as the Scribes and the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day. And what he said made sense! It was a strange Gospel, in some ways, one in which the first shall be last and the last shall be first, but even that had the ring of truth.

Ah, everything about Jesus was sincere. For example, he never asked anyone to do anything that he wasn't willing to do himself. If we were called to be baptized, Jesus would be baptized. If there was forgiveness to offer, Jesus would offer it. If there was any cup to drink, well, Jesus would drink it first.

Jesus knew God's commandments and he followed them, and yet he followed them in sometimes new and amazing ways. It was already shocking enough to hear Jesus justify picking grain on the Sabbath, but he went on to say that the Sabbath was made for humans, and not the other way around. No one had ever said that before!

Oh, how his teachings seemed past due. It was, as if finally, finally, water had breached that sandy wall and had begun to stream into our once stagnate little gully. No longer could everything be as it had been. No longer would we live unto ourselves. No longer would sin be allowed to fester. Not when the cool clean water came pouring in; certainly not when that very living water arrived.

No wonder Palm Sunday was such a triumphant and joyful occasion, but not everyone felt that way. As we all know, some people don't like parades. Some people feel as though they are an obstacle to where they want to go or to what they want to accomplish. Indeed, there always seems to be those who sort of lurk at the edges and who want to "rain" on the parade, as it were.

In the Gospels of Luke and John, they mention some of these characters. Consider the Pharisees' criticisms of Jesus, about the praise that was being given to him upon his entrance into Jerusalem.

But you know what? The Gospel Jesus preached made such a reaction almost inevitable. For his Gospel was like new wines in old wineskins, expanding and tearing that constrictive bag of religiosity at the seams. His Gospel was like yeast in cold wet dough, rising and becoming greater than before. Oh, what Jesus taught was so not the status quo, and it was not at all considered reasonable by the religious powers-that-be. But that's just it! Jesus' entry into that holy city had much more to do with God's vision than it had to do with ours; though it should be noted that God's vision had everything to do with us, because God's vision and God's mission was moving decidedly in the direction of redemption.

Now, one would think that such a parade would arrive at its destination in spite of those who opposed it, and ultimately it does. But we would do well to remember there existed a kind of disconnect even for those who loved Jesus. You see, many people who lined the streets of Jerusalem that day, they were unaware that behind all of the pomp was God's providence, and what had started as a parade of hope and expectancy would soon turn into a solemn procession toward Golgotha, the place of the skull – the place where Jesus would be nailed to a tree. That is where Jesus is going.

I can't help but wonder if some of Jesus' closest disciples were wondering to themselves, "Did we join the wrong parade?" "Should we continue to wait for another?" Consider how it is that their hopes and dreams not only for themselves but for the entirety of God's people, they seemed to be eliminated by the cross. Their strong leader, the one who had said, "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled"...they would hear him say "I am thirsty."

Yet, here again, we must remember that his was a mission that was foreknown from the dawn of time; and, unlike the leaders and warriors of the past, each of whom arrived on the scene with measured attention and who sought to command the heights...oh, unlike those Maccabean brothers who, with sword in hand, blazed very different trails into that same Holy City some years earlier -- God, unlike all of those, and out of sovereign love, chose to redeem us on the battlefield of the human heart, and he did so by the sacrifice of his own Son.

When I was in high school here in Charleston, I attended a weekend retreat called "Happening." It was the Episcopal version of the yet to be established Presbyterian weekend, that would one day be called "Celebration." We watched a short film one night simply called "Parable," and in this film, Jesus is depicted as a white-faced clown in the circus. The clown has just freed the woman whose job it was to be magically "cut in two" as well as the man whose job it has been to fall into a pool of water when he is hit – the clown accomplishes this by first taking their place and then helps them to flee from their employers.

The power play and the escape have caused the circus parade to leave them behind, though not entirely. It turns out that in the very back of the procession we see far more clearly the purposes of God than we do in the front...for there is the clown riding on a donkey accompanied by his two newly freed disciples. It almost leads us to recall the Biblical admonition that the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

So, tell me, if Palm Sunday came through Charleston today... if Jesus came riding down Meeting Street on a donkey right now...what would we think about it? Would we think him to be some itinerant evangelist, someone looking for a meal? It's not speculation, it actually happened. It happened to people who are no better and no worse than we are. Allow me to pose a question: "If Jesus made his entry on this Palm Sunday, April 14, 2019, what would he find here?"

Well, on this particular block of Tradd and Meeting Streets, Jesus would find a church family having just sung: "Hosanna, Loud Hosanna." Perhaps not altogether different from the way

people were singing in Jerusalem's synagogues some 2000+ years ago perhaps singing the Shema: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one God!"

Ah, but here is the crux of the matter...are those really the spiritual beats of the drums that set our hearts to marching? Are those the distinct and faithful rhythms that start our feet tapping as we watch from the curbside? Or, could it be that we are still concerned or confused about where Jesus is headed, that he is going in a way that we might not want to go.

In Harold Fickett's short story "Palm Sunday," Sam Anderson sits in his usual pew with his daughter, Morgan. Morgan, according to Fickett and Sam, is mentally challenged. She is nearly uncontrollable except when she has her little rag doll. Against his wife's wishes, Sam brings Morgan to church every single Sunday. One particular Sunday, a Palm Sunday, the congregation had just listened to the pastor's sermon. The Reverend Martin wondered out loud how it was that the citizens of Jerusalem could recognize Jesus as the Messiah on one Sunday, and hardly a week later, cry out, "Crucify him."

The congregation finally stood for the closing hymn, but on the second verse, Morgan bolted out of Sam's grasp. She grabbed one of the palms from the six white wicker baskets and dashed towards the pulpit. She "began to wail, piercing howls that were distinctly joyous." She swung the palm branch over her head. It was quite the scene!

In an amazing, Spirit-filled response, Fickett writes the pastor walked over, offered Morgan his hand and brought her the remaining distance to the pulpit. He nodded to the organist to stop playing. "There are two kinds of understanding," he said, "the understanding of the mind and the understanding of the heart." The Reverend Martin went on to say: "Morgan has shown us, has shown us all, that Christ has made a triumphal entry into our congregation."

Friends, Jesus Christ continues to travel on the thoroughfares of the human heart even this day! And ours, I suppose, could be some subtle or mental acknowledgment of a past phenomenon - a tip of the hat to a job well done, Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Or perhaps, just as we too were invited to make him room at Christmas, we might join his passion-filled parade at Easter, because we know exactly where this parade is going.

To some, it may look like it's going to the grave, but we know that the one who came to serve and who gave his life as a ransom for many, this humble one who was seemingly last, soon enough we will all be able to see that he has been in the lead the whole time. For he will prove to be the very first born within a large family and his would not be a message of death, it would be a message of life! And to those who believe that Jesus is the son of God, there is that life for them. Life abundant, and life everlasting.

Let us pray...

Gracious and Loving God, by your grace, may our lives be lived as if we were continually waving our palms in the air, for we know that there is great joy in following you - there is triumph and there is life. Help us always to know where you are going, and let not our ideas of who we think you are, cloud our vision of who you really are, lest we find ourselves joining a different procession altogether.

Let yours, O Lord, be the very beat which sets the pace of our lives...our service...our love; and may our following be just that – a matter of following you, rather than a futile attempt to lead the way ourselves. For only you can determine the way our feet should go, and only you can determine the distance we are to travel...the work we have to do.

Lord, make your divine imperatives forever clear to us who gather in your name, that ours would be the kind of faithful procession that would forever point people toward you and toward your kingdom. This we ask in the name of the one who walked the road that we could never walk and paid the price that we could never pay, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

**The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*