

FOLLOWING JESUS THIS WEEK
LUKE 19: 28-40; PSALM 31: 9-16
PALM SUNDAY
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Luke 19: 28-40

28 After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. 29 When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, 30 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. 31 If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.' " 32 So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. 33 As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" 34 They said, "The Lord needs it." 35 Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. 36 As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. 37 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, 38 saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" 39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." 40 He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

I love Palm Sunday. I love hearing the children sing Hosanna as they march around the sanctuary with their palm branches. I like to imagine that the first Palm Sunday was a beautiful day like today. It would have been fun to follow Jesus on Palm Sunday. According to the Gospel of Luke, a multitude of disciples began to praise God joyfully as Jesus rode by.

If we want to follow Jesus this week, we need to remember that it is OK for Christians to have fun. Mother Teresa (Total Surrender, 143) said the best way to preach Christianity to a non-believer is by our cheerfulness and our happiness. We do not have to be like our Puritan ancestors, who were described by H. L. Mencken as people tormented by the thought that somewhere, someone might be having a good time (William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, April 8, 2008, 9).

It is good to be joyful in the moment, in this moment. It is good to praise God with other believers. We can laugh. We can enjoy the children, the music, the food and the fellowship. *Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!*

As we follow Jesus through Holy Week, I hope we remember the joy of Palm Sunday. That joy may carry us through those times that are anything but joyful. We may need to lift the solemnity of Lent, at least for today, so that we can endure what lies ahead. *Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!*

The Pharisees did not approve of the celebration on Palm Sunday. They may have feared retribution from the Romans. Scholars estimate there were at least 60 armed rebellions against the Roman occupation forces during Jesus' lifetime (Willimon, Pulpit Resource, March 28, 2010, 54). The people called Jesus king. They sang about a peace that was not *Pax Romana*. If we follow Jesus this week, we follow one whose kingdom is not the United States of America, the state of Texas or the city of Georgetown. Jesus offers peace, but it is not the peace the world offers.

In their book The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem (2006), John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg contrasted two parades into Jerusalem. Jesus entered Jerusalem from the east. He rode on a donkey in the midst of peasants, farmers and their families. From the west, Pilate entered Jerusalem on his war horse, accompanied by the imperial cavalry.

Last week the media reported that a congressman changed his vote on the health care bill after he rode in Air Force One. Power by the world's standards is impressive. Air Force One travels just 130 knots short of the speed of sound (Homiletics., March 28, 2010, 36) The huge plane is equipped with 80 phones and 238 miles of communication cables. There are comfortable chairs, desks and couches that fold into beds for not only the president and his staff, but also for the press corps who travel with him. There is a medical room complete with a pharmacy, operating table, X-ray machine and a full-time surgeon. Air Force One has two galleys and five chefs capable of serving 100 meals per sitting.

If we are going to follow Jesus this week, we need to remember that this is no trip on Air Force One. God chose to become incarnate as a boy raised by a peasant family in occupied territory. Jesus did not have worldly trappings of power and social status. He was not wealthy, and he did not travel in style. Jesus was humble and obedient. Are we? If we follow Jesus this week, we may look at the world differently. We may find ourselves out of sync with the society in which we live.

This past week has not been a pretty one for our democratic system. Our world finds it increasingly difficult to have civil disagreement. We condemn terrorists, yet our discourse among ourselves is often harsh, aggressive and hateful.

If we follow Jesus this week, there is a different standard. At the Last Supper, which we will celebrate Thursday evening, Jesus gave the great commandment to love others as he loves us. Jesus loved Judas, even though Judas would betray him with a kiss. Jesus built his church by loving people like Peter, who promised loyalty and then denied he even knew Jesus. According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus asked God to forgive those who mocked, tortured and killed him. Who might we love and forgive? If we follow Jesus this week, we may reexamine our attitudes, our words and our relationships.

William Sloane Coffin (Credo in Homiletics, April 2007, 64) observed that loving our enemies does not mean we won't have any. If we follow Jesus, some people will not like it. The Palm Sundays of our

discipleship are wonderful. We should enjoy them. But just as the palm branches will not last long, neither will the celebration.

According to Harvard Chaplain Peter Gomes (Sermons, 60). God's love does not do away with conflict, suffering or tragedy; but God's love will make it possible to bear it, to see it, to share in it, to understand it, and to pass through it, even pass through death. A few years ago a man burst into a Baptist mission hospital in Yemen and opened fire with a machine gun (Pulpit Resource, *April 11, 2007*, 7). He killed three missionaries. They gave their lives to heal the sick. When the man was questioned by authorities, he said he did it for Allah. We follow a God who asks for love, not hate and killing.

The missionaries and volunteers we support through the One Great Hour of Sharing put their lives on the line. Following Jesus does not mean things will always turn out well by the standards of this world, but Christ's Kingdom is not *of* this world. Pilate did not understand, and sometimes we have trouble understanding, too. If we follow Jesus, the Holy Spirit will be with us, especially during times of trial.

If we follow Jesus this week, I hope we do not betray him or deny him. We may not sell Jesus out for money, as Judas did, but are we selling out the gifts and values Christ has given us? Are we chasing after our own notions of popularity, power, success and the good life, instead of living according to God's will? Are we afraid to say we know Christ?

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asked God to take the cup of suffering from him, but Jesus concluded his prayer by saying, "Your will, not my will be done." Are we doing God's will right now in our lives, or are we headed in a different direction?

Most of the religious leaders of Jesus' day did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah they waited for. God comes into the world in ways that will surprise us. Our Risen Lord is still active in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. Mother Teresa (Total Surrender, 142) said that the Good News is that God still loves the world through each one of us. Jesus said that God sends you and me into the world, just as God sent Jesus. If we follow Jesus this week, I hope we will be the body of Christ in our own time and place – at school, at work, in our families, in the church and in our communities.

The worship ministry of this congregation has carefully planned worship services for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter, but coming to worship is not all we will do if we follow Jesus this week. Jesus reached out to the least and the lost. Jesus commissioned us to go and make disciples. Jesus calls us to be his witnesses in the world.

Following Jesus is not only a personal spiritual journey. It is also God's mission in and for the world. If we follow Jesus, we will comfort those who suffer. We will share the Good News, and we will love our enemies.

I treasure Palm Sunday, but soon it will be time to move closer to the cross. We must follow Jesus to the cross if we want to experience new life on Easter. Some Christians do not agree. One Episcopal priest serving a church in a resort town learned this the hard way a few years ago ([Pulpit Resource](#), April 8, 10). He placed crosses in the church yard next to the street for Lent. On Good Friday he carefully draped the crosses in black. A few hours later he received an angry call from someone at the chamber of commerce. "Look preacher," the man said. "We've been getting complaints about those crosses out in your churchyard. Now, inside the church, who cares? But out front, where everybody can see them, they are offensive. People don't like them; they find them depressing. The tourists will not like it either. It will be bad for business. People come down here to get happy, not to get depressed."

Have you placed a cross in your yard? If not, there are some available for purchase in the narthex. The cross yard signs are one way to witness to what we believe. But be careful, some people may find them depressing. Your neighbors may ask you questions. They may think about how you live and what that suggests about your faith and about Jesus Christ. Who knows, someone may even strike up a conversation about religion. Some people may not like your witness. That's the way it goes when we follow Jesus.

Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord. May God bless your journey with Christ through Holy Week. May the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.