

“When Jesus is the Grand Marshal”  
Matthew 21:1-11  
April 17, 2011

Palm Sunday – the annual church parade. Do any of you know that old song, “I Love a Parade?” Well, sadly, I know it – one of the liabilities of growing up Pardue. It sings about “That rat-a tat-tat, the blare of a horn; That rat-a tat-tat, a bright uniform; (The lyrics are quite thought provoking) A handful of vets, A line of cadets or any brigade, For I love a parade.” I haven’t been to that many parades – and those I have attended have been too rainy or too cold or just plain disappointing...except for one. Selma Railroad Days 2009 when our own Zilphia Bailey was the Grand Marshall and she far exceeded my expectations. She came riding in sitting atop a convertible giving the adoring crowds her queen’s wave and looking gorgeous in her red dress and that snow white hair. We stood on the sidelines – no palm branches – but posters and lots of yelling, and then after it was all over, we went to Zilphia’s house for FOOD!

Zilphia could have given Jesus a little word of wisdom here. If he wanted his fans to leave happy, feeling good, feeling like he was worth their efforts, he should have invited them over for food Palm Sunday. Instead, he comes to the end, slams into their temple, pitches a full blown fit, and drives OUT those who, in his opinion, were destroying the spirit of prayer.

That sparked a little controversy, and things started to go downhill, and man, things started out so well for him – this Palm Sunday parade started out so well with such support on the sidelines, and then as the week trudged along, followers begin to drop away and some stomped away...which should not surprise us. We know that the church has trouble hanging on to its followers – always has. Sometimes people leave because the church has lost its way and doesn't live with integrity, and other people leave because the church is simply doing what it's supposed to be doing, living the way it's supposed to live and people decide they don't want to join in the feast. Maybe that is what happened to the crowd around Jesus on that first Palm Sunday. John's Gospel says the crowd went out to meet Jesus, the Grand Marshal, because they had heard about him raising Lazarus from the dead. I don't about you, but that would get me out my hammock. And they all shouted and sang "Hosanna!" and whooped it up as Jesus rode into Jerusalem – what a moment – one that slapped the Pharisees right in the face, because it seemed that the whole world was joining up with this Jesus character. But, the Pharisees should not have worried their pretty little heads. People are fickle. It was only a matter of time until some of the people shouting "Hosanna!" on Sunday left and were shouting "Crucify him!" by Friday. Why? What happened? What changed their minds so dramatically in just a few short days?

The answer may be as simple as expectations – 500 years of expectations to be exact that did not pan out. You see, five hundred years earlier, the prophet Zechariah said that one day there would be a parade like Palm Sunday. That ancient promise was a river of hope gushing into a hurting nation – when times were bad and they just couldn’t take the Roman oppression anymore, they could remember this promise and let it wash over them. For five hundred years, they kept an eye open watching for King David’s successor to gallop into town and assume the throne. For five hundred years, these people have been hoping and expecting and waiting to line the road and cheer. For five hundred years the orchestra has been practicing “Happy Days are Here Again.” I love a parade. So, when Jesus begins to wind his way into town, the people are primed. They stripped the shirts off their backs as a sign of deference to Jesus the Conquering Rabbi. They made palm branches into pom-poms and waved them in the air as a symbol of victory. They shouted Hosanna – blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord! You can

hear the expectation rising up in their voices when they called out to Jesus as the “Son of David” meaning one who is in David’s line and one who is LIKE David – a visionary, a military leader, a warrior, a King, one who will use force to make things right. Hosanna!

It was all very exciting with only one problem. The crowd and Jesus were not on the same page. Granted, it was a time of expectation - it was Passover – Israel’s Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas all rolled up into one. Jerusalem is packed – wall to wall people breathing each other’s air like Time’s Square on New Year’s Eve. But, into all of this glittering hubbub, Jesus goes low-key. He starts with himself, the Son of God Almighty, riding on TWO animals, a donkey and a colt – how did that work any anyway? Did he have one leg over the tall donkey and one leg over the colt? Did he stand on both of them like an acrobat in the circus, one leg straight and the other leg bent? Did he sit sidesaddle on the donkey with his feet on the colt? Who knows, but he came in on a donkey – and riding on a donkey should send a message, yet the crowd ignores the message and they insist on treating him like a superstar. Jesus’ actions say, *no, no, no. Here is who I am. Look at me. I’m a teacher, humble, poor, very much like all of you.* But the actions of the crowd say, *we want more. Be more. Be a ruler. Man up, Jesus. Be a warrior, a king who will razzle dazzle us like David, who will slay the giant we call Rome.* Win the world, Jesus! And, Jesus says, no, I want to redeem the world.

They all talk at once. The crowd’s voice talks and gives words and cheers to all their hopes; and Jesus’ voice talks and gives words to reshaping their hopes, and whose voice do we hear? Where are we? Whose voice do we trust? With 2000 years’ hindsight, it’s easy to say which one we OUGHT to trust. Jesus. But, that is not nearly as easy as we make it sound in church. Jesus is so much a part of our landscape that his voice starts to sound like our voice, when our voice should be sounding more and more like his. Anne Lamott has said, “You can safely assume that you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.” The crowd was creating the Messiah they wanted – to hate the people they hated and love the people they loved and pursue the interests they pursued. They did not trust his decision to hang out with prostitutes. They did not trust his decision to party with sinners and tax collectors. They certainly didn’t want to follow Jesus to a cross, of all things. They wanted to follow him to victory. They wanted to give him a slap on the back and anatta boy and you take care of things, Jesus, and we will cheer you on.

What a lonely ride that must have been for Jesus, the Grand Marshal, knowing what was expected of him and the high hopes that the people and even his disciples had for him...and knowing what was the reality. Every cheer and every hosanna must have stung a little bit more. What a lonely ride that must have been. But, I wonder...

You know, Zilphia had company in her car – and not just the driver. Eileen rode with Zilphia – Eileen was there to share in that grand, Grand Marshal experience...and I wonder. Do you think there is more than meets the eye to Matthew’s mention of those TWO animals that brought Jesus into town? Really, unless Jesus did ride on both animals to showcase his acrobatic abilities, that leaves one free. Was somebody riding on that other one like an Eileen? If so it was someone who, like Jesus, knew that this parade goes by the cross. It was someone who, like Jesus, knew that discipleship is costly. It was someone who, like Jesus, knew that the shouts of "Hosanna!" would quickly morph into "Crucify! Crucify!" It was someone who, like Jesus, knew that the only way to Easter is through Good Friday. It was someone who, like Jesus, believed that power is made perfect in weakness.

Whoever it was it was someone who took the risk of standing with Jesus, walking with Jesus through the crowd, holding Jesus' hand through both the laughter and the tears of faith. It

was someone who couldn't bear the thought of Jesus walking that path alone. Could that be one of us? Could we do it? Could we put down our palms and ride the colt? Could our faith sit up and take notice when Jesus says, "If anyone wishes to come after me let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me." Could our faith do that? Could that be one of us? Could we join the crowd that day and sing the old Gospel hymn, "Must Jesus bear the cross alone, / and all the world go free? / No there's a cross for everyone / and there's a cross for me"? If we could have done that, maybe Jesus wasn't so lonely. If we do that today, maybe Jesus isn't so lonely.

There was a church; one of those country club type congregations where everybody goes to sit in their pew and be seen. Their building was across the street from a college and they had been talking for a long time about how to minister to students, but they just didn't know how to go about it. So they appointed a committee! And, one Sunday during worship, the back door to the sanctuary opened. In walked a young man, college-age, wearing a T-shirt with holes in it, faded jeans, and bare feet. His hair was wild and unruly. He looked around to find an empty seat, but the sanctuary was full and so he came down the aisle scanning the pews for an empty space. Before long everybody in the crowd was aware of him, and they started feeling a bit uncomfortable. "Who is this guy?" they asked themselves. "Is he on drugs??" Near the front of the sanctuary "this guy" concluded there weren't any seats, but rather than turn around and walk out he squatted down on the carpet at the end of the first pew. And there he sat, cross-legged. And then, at the back of the sanctuary, another man began to walk down the aisle. He was one of the church's prominent deacons; a silver-haired man in his eighties in a three-piece suit. He walked to the front, the only sound the shuffle of his feet on the carpet and the thump of his cane. He made his way to the young man, and then, leaning heavily on his cane he eased himself down to the floor beside the stranger, first to his knees, and then with one last grunt, he sank to the floor and crossed his legs. And there they sat, side by side, the oddest couple you've ever seen - the peculiar student, and the distinguished deacon who wanted to make sure this young man didn't worship alone. The minister said, "What I'm about to preach, you will never remember. What you have just seen, you will never forget."

How do we stand with others? That will tell us how we stand with Jesus, and as he makes his way through the events of this week, will anybody notice? Will anybody notice those who suffer this week? Will anybody hear HIS voice through spring break as it echoes into Calvary? As he carries his cross to Golgotha will anybody be there to let him know he isn't alone? Matthew tells us that which you do the least of these, you do to me. And, I believe that. Matthew also tells us that "they all left him and fled." Dear God, I hope we do better this time.