

I

Some years ago a book was written by a noted American historian entitled “When The Cheering Stopped.” It was the story of President Woodrow Wilson and the events leading up to and following WWI. When that war was over Wilson was an international hero, There was a great spirit of optimism abroad, and people actually believed that the last war had been fought and the world had been made safe for democracy.

On his first visit to Paris after the war Wilson was greeted by cheering mobs. He was actually more popular than their own heroes. The same thing was true in England and Italy. In a Vienna hospital a Red Cross worker had to tell the children that there would be no Christmas presents because of the war and the hard times. The children didn't believe her. They said that President Wilson was coming and they knew that everything would be alright.

The cheering lasted about a year. Then it gradually began to stop. It turned out that after the war the political leaders in Europe were more concerned with their own agendas than they were a lasting peace. At home Woodrow Wilson ran into opposition in the United States Senate and his League of Nations was not ratified. Under the strain of it all the President's health began to break. He suffered a stroke and in the next election his party was defeated. So it was that Woodrow Wilson, a man who barely a year earlier had been heralded as the new world Messiah, came to the end of his days a broken and defeated man.

It's a sad story, but one that is not altogether unfamiliar. The ultimate reward for someone who tries to translate ideals into reality is apt to be frustration and defeat. There are some exceptions, of course, but not too many.

It happened that way to Jesus. When he emerged on the public scene he was an overnight sensation. He would try to go off to be alone and the people would still follow him. He was more famous than Johnny Depp, who complained that being famous meant when you wanted to go out to dinner you had to make arrangements for getting in and getting out. The masses lined the streets as he came into town. On Palm Sunday leafy palm branches were spread before him and there were shouts of Hosanna. In shouting Hosanna they were in effect saying “Save us now” Jesus. Great crowds came to hear him preach. A wave of religious expectation swept the country.

But the cheering did not last for long. There came a point when the tide began to turn against him. Oh, you didn't notice it so much at first. People still came to see him, but the old excitement was missing, and the crowds were not as large as they had been. His critics now began to publicly attack him. That was something new. Earlier they had been afraid to speak out for fear of the masses, but they began to perceive that the fickle public was turning on him. Soon the opposition began to snowball. When they discovered that they could not discredit his moral character, they began to take more desperate measures. Before it was all over a tidal wave welled up that brought Jesus to his knees under the weight of a cross.

Why did the masses so radically turn against him? How did the shouts of Hosanna on Sunday transform into the shouts of crucify him on Friday? I am not just talking about the immediate events that may have brought it about, but the deeper root causes. What were the underlying issues? In five days it all fell apart. Why? That is the issue that I would like for us to concentrate on this morning. Why did the cheering stop?

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One reason why the cheering stopped is that Jesus began to talk more and more about commitment. During the last week of Jesus life a very interesting scene occurred, and even more significantly, it occurred in full view of the people. A rich young ruler came enthusiastically running to Jesus. You are all familiar with the dialogue that took place. Jesus says: Go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor and then come follow me. The masses were stunned. They were troubled first for a theological reason. They had been raised to believe that God had especially blessed rich men. Yet, here is Jesus turning the big money away. I wonder how many churches would do that today. We think that people who are wealthy and prominent are individuals who need to be recruited and cultivated. We think their success in the world will lead to our success in the church. It bothered them first of all to see Jesus turn away a rich man.

They were bothered for a second reason. Prior to this Jesus' message had largely been one of grace. When the 5,000 were hungry he feed them. When they brought their sick to him, he healed them. When a woman is caught in adultery and is about to be stoned, it is Jesus who comes to her rescue and saves her. The message of his ministry is one of grace upon grace.

But now he seems to be saying, "The time for miracles is over. The time for commitment is now." It is interesting to note that in all four Gospels after Jesus enters Jerusalem to the shouts of Hosanna and palm branches there is not another miracle recorded. There are some events we might count as miracles but no miracles are done for the people. On the face of it this may not seem significant but when you consider that nearly one half of the Gospels is devoted to the last seven days of Jesus life, you then understand significance of this. While there are no miracles recorded in these chapters what you will find is a persistent call to commitment.

Hungry one morning Jesus stops by a fig tree and finds no figs. He withers the tree because it is producing no fruit. Jesus demands fruitful committed lives.

A Parable is told: Who is more committed? The son who says, "I will work" and then does not or the son who says, "I will not work," repents, and gets the work done? It is the son who does the work.

The greatest commandment is given: Love God and Love your neighbor; again, a call to commitment.

His teachings, “be watchful for we do not know the day or hour of his return,” is also here. After the triumphal entry everywhere Jesus asks for commitment and devotion from the people and what he heard in response he did not like.

Once a vocation director asked how many of those who applied to the seminary were definitely committed to going into the parish ministry, only one raised their hand. One young man spoke up and said: “I have a problem with your use of the word commitment. That sounds very binding and restricting.”

The church of today has become an institution in which even belief in God is optional or peripheral. Marketing techniques for a multiple option institution have replaced response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the means of membership enlistment. The basic appeal is to self-defined needs rather than a call to radical discipleship. The church’s mission all too often is to meet its members perceived needs rather than to serve God’s need for a redeemed, reconciled, and healed world.” Now you can see that problem with today’s Church. We stopped being radical. We started to become part of the world not the source of its redemption.

Our concept of consumerism has crept into the church. To recruit persons and to be marketable we think that we need to be able to say: “Look what our church can offer you.” In this atmosphere of a fraternity rush party, talk of discipleship is muted. Discipleship means knowing who Jesus Christ is and following the revelation made known to us in his teaching, death, resurrection, and presence. Commitment means after the shouts of Hosanna we walk to Golgotha carrying his cross of suffering.

I would suggest to you that when that rich young ruler walked away sorrowfully that day, he was not the only one. I think that it is safe to assume that a host of uncommitted people also walked away. Jesus was no longer talking only grace. He was now speaking about the other side of religion obligation. He began to talk about the obligation that rests with a person who has accepted God’s grace. The cheering began to stop when Jesus began to speak of commitment.

Friends, you had better be careful in resisting the things that God is for. In the Old Testament God comes to Moses in the form of the burning bush. But Moses initially resists that call. Do you know what happens next? God tries to kill Moses. Read the text and see if that is not true. The message is that that burning bush can burn you if you are not careful.

Why did the cheering stop? Because on Palm Sunday, Jesus opened the doors of the church to everyone. It angered some people then, and let me tell you, it will anger some people today.

III

Finally, I would suggest to you that the cheering stopped because Jesus began to talk more and more about a cross. In the early part of his ministry Jesus talked about the

Kingdom of God. This they wanted to hear about, especially since they misunderstood this kingdom to be a restoration of Israel to the days of King David's glory. But increasingly Jesus began to talk about sacrifice—even giving up your life.

The story is told of a pee-wee baseball game. When the young boy got up to the plate he looked over to the coach, and he saw him give the signal to sacrifice bunt. He then promptly proceeded to take three big swings and strike out. The coach ran up to him and said: Didn't you see me give you the signal to sacrifice? Yes, the boy replied. But I didn't really think that you meant it.

Isn't that what we so often say to God? Yes, lord, I heard that talk about sacrifice but I didn't really think that you meant it. The cross says emphatically that he did mean it.

I began this sermon with the question, "Why did the cheering stop?" It stopped because Jesus more and more began to talk about commitment; it stopped because Jesus opened up the doors of the church and invited people to come in. But most importantly of all, it stopped because Jesus began to talk about a cross.

## II

One of the problems I have with preaching this Sunday is that we are at an up moment in Jesus' ministry. Then next Sunday we are at an even higher up moment with the Resurrection. Too few attend services during the week for the really down moments. But, I don't want to tell my Holy Week Sermons just yet, but offer one thought on part of the story those who don't attend will be missing.

A pastor was asked to speak for a certain charitable organization. After the meeting the program chairman handed the pastor a check.

"Oh, I couldn't take this," the pastor said with some embarrassment. "I appreciate the honor of being asked to speak. You have better uses for this money. You apply it to one of those uses."

The program chairman asked, "Well, do you mind if we put it into our special fund?"

The pastor replied, "Of course not. What is the special fund for?"

The chairman answered, "It's so we can get a better speaker next year."

Have you noticed? Life is full of humbling experiences.

A humbler man never lived than Jesus of Nazareth. That is the essence of the Good News for the day. On the one hand, we see that no greater man ever lived than he. He was the very Word of God come down from the Father. He was the Life, the Light, the Truth, the Way. And yet no one ever emptied himself more completely of pride and arrogance than did Jesus Christ.

Consider the donkey on which he rode into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday. You or I would have chosen a handsome stallion on which to ride into the city. After all, we are careful about the kind of car we drive, are we not? The world will not respect an old beat-up Chevrolet like it will a new BMW or a Mercedes. At least, that is what we tell ourselves. Jesus chose a battered up 1957 Studebaker to drive into Jerusalem. That is how I like to imagine that lowly donkey. Certainly that humble beast was not a symbol of pride and prestige.

**It is interesting to watch the strong Son of God acknowledge his dependence on God during those final hours**, if Jesus found it necessary to utterly and completely depend on God, how can you and I live our lives without depending on God as well? I read somewhere that ninety-seven percent of all people offered a new pen to try, write their own name. Now that is understandable. After all, the only time many of us use a pen is when we sign our names. Nevertheless, such a statistic does seem symbolic. It is very difficult for many of us to see beyond our own needs and our own circumstances. It is so essential this morning that we see that humble Galilean riding into Jerusalem on that donkey. In the Nicene Creed Christians affirm that Jesus was “true God from true God.” Yet here he was humbling himself to be sacrificed like a farm animal on the cross of Calvary. Indeed, he is referred to in the book of Revelation as “the Lamb that was slain” (5:12). No crown--no throne--no comfortable palace--he gave it all up for sinful humanity.

This has always endeared Jesus to people at the bottom of society.

John W. Gardner, in his book, *Excellence*, includes a letter by Sarah Gooder, a young girl working in the coal mines of England in 1842. Here is what Sarah wrote:

“I am Sarah Gooder, I am eight years old. I’m a coal carrier in the Gawber Mine. It does not tire me but I have to [work] without a light and I’m scared. I go at four and sometimes half past three in the morning, and come out at five and half past in the evening. I never go to sleep. Sometimes I sing when I’ve light, but not in the dark; I dare not sing then. I don’t like being in the [coal] pit. I am very sleepy when I go in in the morning. I go to Sunday school and learn to read. They teach me to pray. I have heard tell of Jesus many a time. I don’t know why he came on earth. I don’t know why he died, but he had stones for his head to rest on.”

Yes, my friend, that is how people in civilized England lived around the time of our Civil War--an eight year old girl working 14 hours a day in coal mines.

Did you notice what impressed Sarah Gooder about Jesus, though? “He had stones for his head to rest on.” No soft pillow in a luxurious mansion for him. He cared enough to come down where Sarah was! Do you have that much greatness within you--to see the needs of the least and the lowly? Or are you one of these petty, little people who can see only his or her own needs?

**Humility is the key to greatness.** That is an important thing for us to see. Servanthood is the path to true success. Some of the greatest people who ever lived have viewed themselves as servants, and they have blessed our world.

There was an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* sometime back about a 14-year old Jewish girl at the end of World War II who was discovered lost, alone, and barely alive lying on the platform of an abandoned railroad station. It was the day the Russian army liberated the Nazi controlled labor camp where she was held captive.

Though she was free, she was half-starved and too exhausted to pick herself up off the ground. She thought she would die there. But then a young priest came beside her. He offered her tea, two slices of bread, and some cheese.

“Where do you want to go?” he asked her.

“Krakow,” she managed to reply.

“I’m going there too,” he said. “Let me help you up.” He tried to lift Edith to her feet but she collapsed. So he picked her up and literally carried her two miles to the train to Krakow.

“What is your name?” he asked.

“Edith Zierer,” she replied.

“My name is Karol,” replied her rescuer. When they arrived at Krakow, they were separated and they never saw each other again. Until the year 2000.

In Jerusalem, at the Holocaust memorial, Edith Zierer, with tears in her eyes, clasped the hands of a Polish priest named Karol, whom the world grew to know as Pope John Paul II. The Pope had performed that quiet act of service of lifting up and carrying this poor Holocaust survivor and had forgotten it. But Edith didn't. Before the whole world she declared, “He came like an angel out of nowhere and gave me life. He saved me. There's no other word for it. It's thanks to him I'm here today.”

Then Edith Zierer quoted a verse from the Talmud which says, “To save one life is to save the world.” (1)

Sometimes when we think of the pope we associate him with the pomp and circumstance of his lofty office. We forget that many of the modern popes have had the heart of a servant.

All greatness grows out humility and service.

Jesus came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Part of this was undoubtedly to fulfill an ancient prophecy. When Solomon was anointed king, he rode into the city on a mule, to the shouts and praises of the people (1 Kings 1:43-45). Zechariah prophesied the Messiah would arrive the same way “gentle and riding on a donkey” (Zech. 9:9). Jesus knew about this prophecy when he chose a donkey for his ride.

But this act was also completely in his character. “He humbled himself,” writes St. Paul “and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:8).

You see, according to theologian Marcus Borg, there were two parades in Jerusalem that Palm Sunday. We see Jesus riding on a small donkey, accompanied by his followers coming from the north into Jerusalem. But that parade wasn't the largest or most spectacular parade in town during that particular Passover season. Also entering Jerusalem at Passover, from the west, was the Roman governor Pontius Pilate.

Like the Roman governors of Judea before him, Pontius Pilate lived in Caesarea by the sea. In other words, Pilate spent most of his time at his beach house. But with crowds of devout Jews flowing into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, Pilate put on a display of force. After all Passover commemorates the Jews' deliverance from the rule of Pharaoh. Pilate didn't want them to get any ideas about a similar liberation from Rome.

When Pilate entered Jerusalem with his army, his aim was to prevent any possibility of violent rebellion against Roman rule. The Roman army that accompanied Pilate included, “cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold.”

All this would have had a sobering effect on all those who saw this parade.

So, there was Pilate willing, without exception, to take the life of anyone who dared question his authority, and there was Jesus, willing, without exception, to lay down his life for the least and lowest. No contrast could be more stark.

In a CBS News *60 Minutes* interview, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor was asked why she had resigned as an Assistant District Attorney for the Bronx. She replied, “Because for the first time in my life I saw evil first hand and I felt that if I stayed that close to it, it just might rub off on me.”[1] Come think with me about an age-old human affliction that has impacted the life of every person ever born and the two people

who were not born but created in the Garden of Eden, a thing called evil. Justice Sonia Sotomayor feared that it might rub off on her.

Let me ask you a question: Have you ever encountered evil? Do you know anything about the machinations of evil? In his book *People of the Lie*,<sup>[2]</sup> the late American psychiatrist Scott Peck discusses evil. According to Dr. Peck, evil people are consistently self-deceiving with the intent of avoiding guilt and maintaining a self-image of perfection and are characterized not so much by the magnitude of their sins, but by their consistently destructive practices. This syndrome results in a projection of evil onto selected innocent people who are seen only as play things or tools to be manipulated. This is the paradoxical mechanism by which evil people, Peck's "people of the lie," commit their despicable deeds. Sonia Sotomayor says as an Assistant District Attorney she saw evil. Psychiatrist Peck writes that such people are rarely seen by psychiatrists. He further asserts that psychiatry has no successful treatment plans for evil people. I submit that only the gospel of Jesus Christ can overcome evil as we see, in fact, that happened repeatedly while Jesus walked among us.

E-V-I-L! Scott Peck used to tell the story of how he, a highly regarded scholar and writer, was struggling to find a succinct definition of evil for his *People of the Lie* book. His then eight-year-old son, noticing the expression on his father's face, asked his daddy what was troubling him. "I'm trying to define evil." "That's easy," the son replied, "evil is LIVE spelled backward!" That is what it is!

So I would speak today about LIFE lived in reverse gear, perverted goodness that does the right things for the wrong reasons. Evil is demonstrated in misplaced self-focused passion, negative, critical spirituality, love running in the wrong direction, a phenomenon that hurts our humanity and defaces our divinity. Evil is live spelled backward.

### **Evil's Genesis**

From what perverted place did evil emanate? According to the book of God's revelation, it showed up initially in a certain garden. The Genesis record says in substance that evil presented itself in serpentine form to Eve, the mother of all living. There, in that garden, what was a rapturous relationship between the Creator and the creature was ruptured and riveted into a raucous reality. But is that garden really the only locus of evil's genesis? I'm afraid not.

If we really want to look at evil's nefarious beginnings we must look up. Up past where the eagles play; up beyond the sun, the moon, and the stars; all the way up to a throne room in glory where cherubim chant and seraphim sing; where elders cry out, "Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord God of hosts." Isaiah tells us that evil began there.

Lucifer, one of heaven's angels, desired to usurp the established divine authority and had the temerity to say, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God... I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:13-14). After that, God was forced to expel Lucifer from the heavenly habitat and Lucifer, whose name means "light," fell into dark ways. He plummeted downward from the home of grace. Yet, when he fell, he did not fall all the way. He came down but he did not crash. His fall was halted somewhere between high enough from earth and low enough from heaven for him to receive the title "Prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2 ESV). He descended from heaven and fell just high enough to set up shop where he could deputize emissaries for the purpose of reaping havoc among us,

our forbears, and generations not yet born. That, according to the Bible, is where evil found its origins and where its roots are found today

### **Evil Personified**

The most pronounced human example of this diabolical thing called evil is a certain man named Judas Iscariot. Have you ever wondered why Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, would choose a man like Judas to be a disciple in the first place? Has that question not crept up at least to the outskirts of your mind? Why would he choose a man in whom he surely knew there was a devil? Jesus knew what he was doing. I read of him asking, "Have I not chosen twelve and one of you is a devil?" (John 6:70). I believe Jesus brought Judas into the ranks of the disciples for several reasons that I would like to share with you.

### **Choosing Evil**

First, Jesus allowed Judas to be part of the twelve to demonstrate evil's omnipresence. Jesus wants us to understand that clearly. What we mean is that there is no place south of heaven where evil is not to be found. You may remember, for example, the experience recorded in Job's life where the sons of God come to present themselves before God himself. Do you remember also who comes with them? It is the bold Satan. Scripture says, God interrogated him: "Satan, where have you come from?" "Well, God, I've just been going to and fro throughout the earth." "For what purpose, Satan?" "Well, seeking whom I may devour" (cf. Job 1:7ff). Then a little later the sons of God come again to present themselves. God looks and Satan is still there. Again God asks, "Satan, where are you coming from?" "Same place, going to and fro throughout the earth seeking whom I may devour. God, you really don't have to worry about me. I'm not like these mortals created in your image. I am, if nothing else, consistent."

Evil is everywhere all the time. He was "among the sons of God." He is even within the confines of the church of the living God. But, you knew that, didn't you? Sometimes we Christians make the mistake of thinking Satan is working hardest in places he long ago left. He does not need to hang out in the so-called "worldly" places. His primary place of action today is within the church. In his *The Screwtape Letters*,<sup>[3]</sup> C.S. Lewis has the devil Screwtape instruct his nephew, Wormwood, the apprentice demon, that if he really wants to disrupt God's work on earth the best place to do that is from inside the church. So Wormwood is told to become involved in the inner workings of the church with the express intent of ingratiating himself so that he might begin his destructive work from the inside. Satan comes wherever God's people gather. He comes on time. He comes before time. He likes a good seat. He gets himself on church boards and committees. He becomes an usher so he can greet well-intentioned worshipers with his sour and surly spirit.

He sings in the choir. Martin Luther once said, "When the devil fell, he fell into the choir loft." Luther understood the power of music. Luther and Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote hymns in order to teach the gospel with song. The choir sings in order to point us to Jesus. Lucifer was in the heavenly choir when he was expelled. He will even climb up the steps into the pulpit and stand up in sacred space if we are not careful. The question we must ask even of ourselves is, "What motivates us to become involved in the things we do?" There is an interesting line in John's Revelation about "the synagogue of Satan" (Revelation 3:9 ESV). It makes us wonder if there are some churches where Satan has particular control.



a second reason why Jesus picked Judas Iscariot to be one of the twelve. He wanted to demonstrate to us that even when given a chance, not everyone would follow good leadership. Jesus chose this son of perdition to show us that even the best leaders will not be universally accepted. After he led the British people to victory from almost certain defeat in World War II, Winston Churchill was rejected by the very people whose lives and livelihood he saved. Judas was with the Son of God for three years. It was three years of exposure to perfect goodness and unfeigned love; three years with the finest example of humanity who ever set foot on this planet.! Perhaps Jesus chose Judas to show us that mere physical proximity is no proof of spiritual similarity. One can be close to the fire and be as spiritually cold as a winter day in the Arctic Circle. Sometimes those who have been in the church for a long time do not have the foggiest notion of what the church, God's kingdom, is about. Close proximity is no sign of spiritual nearness, and Jesus wants us to understand that not everyone will necessarily follow good leadership.

a third reason: namely, to encourage his church with the truth that good is more potent than evil. Most of us tend to agree with Mark Anthony who declared that "the good that men do is often interred with their bones while the evil that men do lives after them." That, however, is not necessarily so. Paul instructs us, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). In the kingdom good is far stronger than evil. Do you realize that in three years Judas did not succeed in winning a single convert to his way of thinking? Not one! Knowing how the devil operates, we can be sure that it was not for want of trying.

I can imagine that Jesus selected Judas for at least one other reason. He wanted to teach us how to deal with evil. They enter that house and go up the stairs to the second story. Once there, they go into an upper room. Remember, it was an Upper Room. Plant that line firmly in your thinking. It was an Upper Room. One of my favorite preachers, the late Dr. William A. Jones, told me a story out of his native Kentucky. He said that up in the mountains there is an interesting thing called the "snake line." Experienced hunters know the elevation of the snake line, not because they have gone around the mountains and drawn a white line and put a "snake line" label on it. Experienced hunters, according to Dr. Jones, just know the elevation of the snake line. When hunters go on a hunt, they always pitch their tents above that snake line so that while the hunter sleeps rattlesnakes and other poisonous creatures will not come around to inflict harm and possibly death. Snakes cannot survive above the snake line.

It was the Upper Room. Jesus led the disciples up above the snake line. There sitting around the table they celebrated the Passover meal and Jesus announced, "One of you will betray me." Judas, the snake, could not last in that environment. He stayed for the feast then left in a hurry. Judas left. He fled to some other snakes and strategized as to how he would inflict his poison.

### III

Does anybody remember when pet rocks became a big fad in this country?

In April 1975, Gary Dahl was in a bar listening to his friends complain about their pets. This gave him the idea for the perfect “pet” -- a rock. Think about it. A rock would not need to be fed, walked, bathed, or groomed; furthermore, pet rocks would not die, become sick, or be disobedient. He said they would be perfect as pets, and joked about it with his friends.

But Dahl later took his idea further than simply sharing it with a few of his drinking buddies. He began selling ordinary gray stones bought at a builder’s supply store as pet rocks. These rocks were marketed like live pets, in custom cardboard boxes, complete with straw and holes to allow the pet rock to breath. He also drafted an “instruction manual” for a pet rock. It was full of puns, gags and plays on words. The rest, as they say, is history. (1)

Only in America, I suppose, could a gag like pet rocks become big business. The fad lasted about six months. Dahl, who died in 2015, sold 1.5 million Pet Rocks and became a millionaire. By the way, you can still buy a pet rock with a walking leash on Amazon for \$13.99. What a great country.

I thought about pet rocks when I thought about our lesson for today.

It’s been said that true Christianity is a radical experiment that has only been tried once, by St. Francis of Assisi, who gave up everything because of his love for Christ.

In one St. Francis story, St. Francis is on a pilgrimage, and he’s singing. Someone asks him where he’s going and he says, “I’m going to God.” They ask him where he’s coming from, and he says, “I’m coming from God.”

“And why do you sing?” they ask.

“I sing to keep from losing my way,” he responds.

Says Pastor Michael D. Powell, “That’s my image of Jesus as he’s entering Jerusalem. The sun is out, the birds are singing, dogs are barking and children are laughing. It’s a beautiful day for a parade, and Jesus is happy. He knows where he’s coming from and he knows where he’s going. His eyes are fixed on God, and there’s a song in his heart.” (2)

That’s a heart-warming thought. It’s true Jesus knows where he’s coming from and where he is going, but he also knows there’s going to be a lot of pain in between.

Palm Sunday is Jesus’ coming out party. This is where he presents himself to the world as the Messiah. Every once in a while we have the opportunity to present ourselves to others--whether it is through a casual introduction, or a job interview, or a speaking engagement, or even a first date. Sometimes those presentations go well. Sometimes they don’t.

A young man goes to the boss of a company for a job interview.

“Well, well, well!” says the boss. “Just what I like to see in my company--a bright young man ready for a challenging position. And you say you’ve just gotten out of Yale. That’s my alma mater! Now, what was your name again?”

The young man replies, “Yones.” Yones who has just gotten out of Yale.

O. K., no more bad jokes for this morning. I can’t promise about next week, though.

Sometimes when we try to present ourselves to others, things go well. Sometimes they do not. Nevertheless, usually it is important to us that we make a good impression. They say it’s never too late to make a good first impression. How sweet it is when our efforts are met with success--when our efforts are appreciated and applauded.

Jesus is about to present himself to the Holy City of Jerusalem. His goal, as we noted, is to present himself as the Messiah. Up until this time, Jesus has been reluctant to make his mission official--somewhat like presidential candidates who spend so much time before the primaries dancing around whether they are candidates or not. We think of how many times Jesus has said to people up to this point something like, “Don’t tell anyone what I’ve done for you. Don’t tell

anyone who I am, etc.” But now the time . . . his time . . . God’s time has come. The time of preparation is over and the time of presentation is at hand.

Jerusalem will be Jesus’ big reveal--to use a term from the modern vernacular. If you are not familiar with this term, the “reveal,” also known as “the big reveal,” is a plot device in storytelling. It refers to the moment when a previously hidden key element of the plot is exposed to the audience. It is that “ah ha!” moment when you say, “So this is where the narrative is headed.” Palm Sunday is Jesus’ big reveal.

Jesus is headed to Jerusalem. He has come up from Jericho. As he approaches Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sends two of his disciples ahead, saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it.’”

Jesus’ instruction to these two disciples was to find him the colt of a donkey and bring it to him. Jesus was clearly fulfilling Zechariah’s prophecy that the Messiah will ride a donkey (Zechariah 9:9-10). But what is the significance of the Messiah riding a donkey?

Just this: All of Israel was waiting for a Messiah who would be a political revolutionary. They expected the Messiah to come riding on a horse with his sword drawn prepared to overthrow the Roman oppressor. They had somehow missed Zechariah’s prophecy.

In the days of Zechariah, when a king came riding on a horse, he was announcing his intention to declare war on his enemy. However, when the king came riding on a donkey, he was announcing his intention to make peace with his enemies.

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on a donkey was an announcement that he had come to usher in a kingdom of peace. Riding on a donkey was a prophetic declaration of his purpose and mission, not just for Jews but for all of humanity. He came in peace, for peace and to bring peace--a peace that without Christ the world can never know.

Jesus had prepared all his life for this day. It was a divine appointment--so much so that even the owners of the donkey responded agreeably when they were told simply, “The Lord has need of it.”

The Spirit of the Lord went ahead of the disciples and prepared the heart of the owners of the colt. There’s good news in that as well. You see, when God has a plan and a purpose, nothing can stand in His way. If God says that His kingdom is coming, it’s time for us to join the preparation committee.

E. Stanley Jones once told about a young man who was arrested for preaching the Kingdom of God. He defended himself by declaring that he was only preaching what Jesus had preached long ago. The prosecutor refuted his argument by saying, “But the Kingdom of God has not come yet.”

“It has for me,” the young man replied. And that’s the way it ought to be. The Kingdom with its message of hope is at hand to those who believe. (3)

“The Lord has need of it.” That’s all it took and the disciples threw their cloaks on the donkey, making a saddle for Jesus to ride triumphantly into Jerusalem to begin the process of bringing in his kingdom of peace.

Jesus advanced down the west side of the Mount of Olives toward the city and was indeed welcomed by the crowd as their Messiah. They threw their cloaks on the road, forming a royal carpet as a way of showing their respect. The whole crowd of believers began to joyfully praise God for all the miracles 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!”

This is a direct reference to Psalm 118:26. Luke is the only gospel writer who uses the words “peace” and “glory.” The other writers used the word, “Hosanna,” which Luke’s Gentile audience would not have understood.

The fact that the crowds welcomed Jesus like this troubled the Pharisees and they told Jesus to rebuke his followers. To this Jesus replied, “I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” Imagine that, the stones or rocks crying out. I told you I would come back to pet rocks. If the crowds kept silent, all the pet rocks would be crying out, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Nothing can stop this movement, Jesus is telling them. If the crowds were silenced, even inanimate objects would be raised up to testify that he is the Messiah. All of history was preparing for this one single event, when he would be declared as king. Luke’s narrative clearly paints the picture that this was a divinely orchestrated event. He takes us on a journey to help us understand that nothing can thwart or frustrate what God has already predestined to happen. Later, in Revelation 6:2, Jesus will be presented as one riding on a horse. That is when the kingdom of God shall come in all its fullness--a kingdom of peace and love, where every tear will be wiped away and every wrong will be made right. That kingdom will be particularly good news for those who are oppressed and those who suffer.

Bishop Stephen Bouman tells a story that I believe reflects that kingdom. He tells about his congregation in New Jersey which, in his words “began to find [its] power as a congregation” when it threw open its doors to the poor and the homeless. He mentions one man in particular. His name was Edgar. He lived alone in a nearby welfare motel “better known for drug addicts and prostitutes than for the righteous.”

For some reason, Edgar adopted Bouman’s church. It was not always a perfect fit--which is an understatement. Edgar was rough around the edges. On occasion, he got loud and demanding and was known to interrupt the sermon if he didn’t agree with something the preacher said. Bouman says that, if the truth be told, his heart sank on Palm Sunday when Edgar was waiting in the sanctuary for him after a full day of pastoral responsibilities. He knew that Edgar wanted something--a ride, perhaps some of his time--and Edgar would be complaining about this and that. Bouman wanted to go home. He was tired. But by the grace of God, he did not get that opportunity.

On the drive to the motel, Edgar talked his ear off. They pulled into the parking lot of a rundown motor inn near a bridge. Then, in that most dismal setting, the most wonderful thing happened. A door opened and an elderly woman emerged from the motor inn. She knocked on another door and another elderly woman emerged. They limped toward Bouman’s car. They were joined by others waiting on the edge of the parking lot.

Then, for the first time Bouman noticed that Edgar had grasped in his hands some palm branches from that morning’s church service. He had promised the folks at the motel that he would bring them some palm branches and he was delivering on that promise.

There they were--mothers and their children, addicts, prostitutes, the mentally ill. As they surrounded the car, Bouman thought of Jesus’ words, “Truly, I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you for they believed in Him.”

“Get out of the car,” said Edgar as he thrust the palms into his pastor’s hand. “Give them the palms!” And Bouman distributed the branches among those waiting. “Bless them,” Edgar demanded. And so Bouman blessed the palm branches. Then Edgar placed Bouman’s hand on each forehead and pronounced a benediction. (4)

In my opinion, that’s a beautiful picture of Christ’s coming kingdom.

Here's what Palm Sunday says to us--nobody will be left out of God's kingdom regardless of the challenges they've faced in this life. See your king, God says to us--he's riding on a donkey. Thank God for that. Later--when it's time, according to Revelation 6--you'll see him on a white horse, but for now, on this occasion, it's a donkey. The Messiah comes with peace and humility. But here's what's even more beautiful. Revelation 7:9-12 mentions palm branches again. And it's definitely about Edgar and his crowd . . . and you and me. We read, "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'

"All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: 'Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!'"

Maybe Jesus **was** singing as he entered Jerusalem that day. He could see what lay ahead, yes, the cross--but beyond the cross to the resurrection . . . and his ascension to be with the Father . . . and then to Pentecost when the church would be empowered to carry out his ministry . . . and to today in 2016 when we would be gathered in worship to sing his praise . . . and then all the way to the end of time when all the saints of God will be gathered around the throne to sing God's praise forever. And, if any pet rocks are there, they will be singing, too. After all, Christ said on that first Palm Sunday as the people shouted out his praise, "I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." This is of God, he is saying. And nobody can stop it. Amen.

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1. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pet\\_Rock](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pet_Rock).
  2. <http://www.ashlandmethodist.org/04-04-04.html>.
  3. L. D. Johnson, *Images of Eternity*, compiled by Marion Johnson (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1984), p. 57.
  4. [http://day1.org/715-lowrent\\_righteousness](http://day1.org/715-lowrent_righteousness).